Precious Blood

By: DisneyFanatic2364

In the dark forests of Tramplevania dwells a coven of vampires led by a deadly draconequus named Discord. For many years, his only interests have been in his own survival, until he stumbles upon a beautiful mare with a heart pure enough to care for a monster like him.

Status: complete

Published: 2015-09-20

Updated: 2016-08-24

Words: 197305

Chapters: 40

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Horror/Romance - Characters: [Discord, Fluttershy] Sunset Shimmer, Starlight Glimmer - Reviews: 1,598 - Favs: 614 - Follows: 393

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/11517124/1/Precious-Blood

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

Precious Blood

Introduction
Zebiu, Tramplevania
Gowns and Garlic
For What Purpose?
At First Sight
Nightmares
Legends and Longings
Invitation
For Dinner?
The Vagabond
The Investigator
The Inmate
The Seamstress
Orphan
Delights
Surprise
Missing
Count Trenderhoof
Sunset
Dangers
Questions
Union
Encounters
Games
Dreams
Sleeping Pains
High Society
Desires

It Is Not The Fashion
Is It Enough?
The Farmer and the Poet
Rescue
Plans
From Here On To Eternity
Confrontations
Vendetta
Cavalry
Resolution
Aftermath
Parting Ways
Epilogue

Zebiu, Tramplevania

I hit a wall with "The Princess and the Unicorn," and when I can't write, I'm anxious. Then I had an MLP-related dream a few nights ago and since then, my mind has been weaving it into a fanfic. I just sat down and tried writing it and finished this chapter within a few days. This is more than I've written in the past few weeks!

Fair warning, this is darker than the stuff I usually write and is technically an overused trope. Have I really resorted to writing vampire romance? Well, let's just say I'm not satisfied with how vampire romance has been presented in media lately. Yes, this is a romance and there are vampire, but I'll be adopting more from classic Transylvanian lore, since I've spent my high school years in Romania and have actually been to Transylvania. I will be putting my own spin on things, but I can assure you, THESE vampires will NOT SPARKLE!

Disclaimer: I do NOT own "My Little Pony." And actual Romanians, if I get some words wrong, let me know, but Transylvanian geography may be altered a bit for this pony universe.

Tramplevania is a land situated in the Caprathian Mountains, filled with lush forests and sparkling rivers. During the day, it is quite peaceful. The smell of the oaks and beeches, the sound of the trickling streams, the clear blue skies and the sight of the sheep grazing in the fields are sure to please any passerby.

Then night falls. The looming moon comes up in the sun's place, the rivers turn black, the vast forest becomes so dark that you can't see past the trees before you. Even if you have the eyes of a cat, fog often rolls in. Then you have the unpleasant feeling that you are being watched and that something is waiting for the right moment to jump out of the fog and put your time in this world to an end.

You might shrug your shoulders and say it is your imagination, but in Tramplevania, that is never the case.

This land is the home of the supernatural: witches, werewolves, ghosts, creatures that walk disguised in the daytime and lurk in the shadows at night. If you are out alone in the forest after dark, and you suddenly feel the hairs on your neck stand up, it is most likely one of these creatures is near.

Frightful? Perhaps. But the reality is that most of these creatures are harmless.

Witches are just equine citizens practicing old magic that doesn't require unicorn status and they often use it to help others. Although there will be the occasional witch with dark intentions, so it is best not to provoke one should this be the case.

Werewolves are merely ponies who become wolves in the light of a full moon and are hardly ever aware of their transformation. In their wolf state, they carry all the instincts of a predator, so should you ever encounter one, simply lie face down on the ground and remain motionless and they will pass you over.

Ghosts are poor lost souls and are usually non-violent. As they are transparent, they can have no physical contact with the living world. Should you see one, the best way to avoid conflict is to ignore it.

The monsters you should be looking out for are the deadliest you will ever encounter: vampires.

These undead creatures could kill you in a second, in whatever way they wish. Some will be quick and sink their teeth immediately in your neck. Others might have a bit of fun and throw you around a bit. Either way, there is no chance of survival should you ever come across a vampire. They survive on blood, and to them, you are just another meal. Unless you are equipped with a wooden stake or a string of garlic, you will either die on the spot or become one of them as a result of their bite.

But there are those rare occasions when a vampire will spare a potential meal. Why? The answer varies, but one theory is that even

though their hearts have stopped beating, parts of their living selves still remain.

The town of Zebiu was a large yet rustic town up the side of the largest mountain in the Caprathians. Merchants often came to the city to trade, and thus the streets were always bustling with ponies trying to get their hooves on foreign goods during the day. The success of the market made many ponies fairly wealthy, but the wealthiest in Zebiu was a family who lived in a large, vibrant mansion in the town square.

The lady of this house was Starlight Glimmer, a noblemare who took pride in her status and frowned on anything below her. She had in her care a young niece whom she had taken in as a filly when her parents had died. She was determined to mold her niece into a fine and eligible young lady so that she would one day marry either a wealthy bachelor or a stallion of noble birth. As she had recently turned twenty, that day would be coming soon.

One day, Starlight received a letter that made her lips curl in excitement.

"Fluttershy!" she called. When she got no answer, she frowned and called louder, "Fluttershy!" She turned to her maid. "Coco Pommel, where is my niece?"

The cream-colored earth pony looked down at her hooves as if she was being punished. "I…I don't know, doamnă."

"Well, *find her* !"

The lady's voice was so sharp that it made the maid jump. She was just about to leave the hall when a yellow pegasus with a flowing pink mane came rushing down the stairs.

"Yes, Auntie Starlight?" she called softly. "Did you call me?"

The pink unicorn glared at her. "What took you so long?"

Fluttershy shrank back under her gaze. "Sorry, Auntie, but," she

petted the wet white rabbit in her hooves, "I was giving Angel a bath and…"

Starlight groaned as she put her hoof to her head. "How many times have I told you? A lady does not waste her time with animals!"

Angel squeaked as Starlight used her magic to wrench him out of Fluttershy's grasp and fling him at Coco Pommel.

"I said you could have a pet," the unicorn continued in her harsh tone, "but taking care of it is a job for the *servants* !"

Fluttershy hung her head. "Sorry, Auntie, I thought…"

"You *thought* ?!" Starlight grunted. " *Thinking* is not a proper pastime for a lady *either* !" She turned sharply towards the maid. "Get that rodent out of here!" She sniffed the air and gagged. "And give him another bath!"

Angel shook his paw at the unicorn, squeaking angrily as the maid carried him off. Starlight took a deep breath and put her smile back on.

"Anyway," she said in a sweet voice, "I have some exciting news!" She held up the letter she'd been reading. "I just got word from the Count Trenderhoof, and he is anxious to meet you!"

"Oh," Fluttershy uttered, her frown not wavering.

"As you know, Count Trenderhoof owns a vast amount of land near Bullarest and has a fortune of seven hundred thousand! On top of that, he's rumored to be the handsomest stallion from miles around!"

The pegasus bit her lip. "But…is he nice?"

Starlight raised an eyebrow. "Nice? Didn't you hear a word I said? He's rich, he's of high station, and he's handsome. What could be nicer than that?"

"I mean…is he kind?"

" *Kind* ?" Her aunt rolled her eyes as she folded up the letter. "You

really need to get your priorities straight, dear. Anyway, he's planning a trip up to Zebiu in a few weeks and will be staying here as our guest, so you should start brushing up on your vocabulary. Remember, when conversing with a stallion, you have to sound smart enough to impress him but not too smart that you'll intimidate him."

"But Auntie…" Fluttershy started to say.

"That wasn't a suggestion, Fluttershy," Starlight said, giving her a warning glare. "Go to your room and recite from the dictionary."

Her niece sighed and muttered, "Yes, Auntie."

She trotted sulkily up the stairs as her aunt began listing aloud the things they needed to prepare for the Count's arrival. When she came to her room, Coco Pommel was dunking Angel in a soapy tub, both of them putting up quite a fight.

"That's enough, Coco," Fluttershy said as she grabbed her bunny. "I can dry him off."

"But domnişoară," the maid protested, "your aunt said…"

"I know what she said. Just…don't tell her about this."

Coco bowed and skittered out of the room. Fluttershy whispered gently as she stroked Angel's fur to calm him down.

"Sorry about that, Angel, but you know how Auntie Starlight is."

The bunny huffed in annoyance as she wrapped him in a towel.

"I know, I know. I shouldn't let her tell me what to do, but what *can* I do? She's my guardian, and she only wants what's best for me."

Angel glared at her, as if to say: *Best for* you *or best for* her?

Fluttershy sighed as she rubbed him dry. "She just wants me taken care of. There aren't many other opportunities here for mares anyway." She hung her head. "She thinks Count Trenderhoof will be a good match for me."

The rabbit stuck out his tongue and gagged.

"Oh, Angel. Don't be rude. You haven't even met him yet."

He crossed his paws and twitched his nose.

"I know. I haven't either. Still, maybe he's nice." She smiled as she threw away the towel, lifted Angel up to her face and nuzzled his soft white fur. "Well, if I marry him, I hope he'll at least let me keep you so I won't be alone."

He squeaked in satisfaction and put his paws around her face in a hug.

"Well," Fluttershy said, rising up, "I better get to my vocabulary."

She sat at her desk, opened the large dictionary and placed Angel on her lap.

"Now, where did we leave off? Oh, yes. *Pleasure: the condition or sensation induced by the experience or anticipation of what is felt to be good or desirable; a feeling of happy…satisfaction…enjoyment… delight…* "

She sighed sadly and glanced out the window. Her room was high up enough to get a view of the town square. Merchants were at their stalls selling their wares, fillies were throwing coins in the fountain, and a group of Romane ponies were playing music and dancing. This particularly made her smile. Her aunt often told her to stay away from the colorfully dressed vagabonds, but she loved watching them dance. Sometimes she imagined herself dancing with them, dressed in such vibrant, loose attire, not always having to wear a corset that made breathing difficult. They always looked so carefree, traveling from town to town, never having to conform to any social customs. She wondered if they married for love. Well, she had never had the chance to ask, but she envied their freedom all the same.

She looked back at the word "pleasure."

"If only I could have that, Angel," she sighed, petting her bunny. "If only for a moment."

In the darkness of the forest, a tall, thin creature was slithering through the trees. As it found concealment behind one, its yellow eyes with red pupils glowered at a brown bear a few feet away. The creature crouched down low, concealing himself in the blackness of the shadows and the cape draped down his back.

"That's right," he whispered in a deep, mesmerizing voice. "Come closer."

The bear looked up and made eye contact with the creature, whose eyes had turned into colorful spirals. After a few seconds of staring, the bear's eyes changed to match his.

"Come closer," he said again, holding out a claw resembling an eagle's and beckoning the bear with a bony yellow talon.

The bear stepped forth slowly, showing no resistance to the creature calling him. Finally, the creature leapt out and pounced on the bear, sinking his teeth into its neck. The bear cried out as it snapped out of its trance, but it was too late. It sank to its knees as the blood was drained from it. Its eyes rolled back as it collapsed to the ground, never to rise again.

The vampire couldn't deny the bear was delicious, but reminded himself that he couldn't be greedy. Once he was satisfied, he wiped the blood from his mouth and held out a lion's paw. A large burlap sack materialized out of thin air. He scooped the bear's bloody corpse into the bag and threw it over his shoulder.

"Nothing personal, old fellow," he murmured. "But I've got four other mouths to feed."

In the middle of the wood, he came upon an enormous black castle safely hidden by the tall oak trees. As he approached the gate, he saw a blue face in a window on the second floor. It disappeared as soon as it saw him coming. A few seconds later, the large double doors opened and the face reappeared. It was attached to the body of a pegasus mare with red-violet eyes and a vibrant rainbow mane. Even though she was clearly a mare, she wore maroon trousers and a puffy red shirt. She rushed to the approaching creature excitedly.

"Master Discord! What'd you bring us?"

She could see him better as he came into the light. He was a draconequus, a creature with a body made up of all sorts of animals: a deer antler and goat horn growing atop the gray head of a pony sitting on a long giraffe-like neck, a goat beard growing below his blood-stained fangs. His green dragon leg, goat leg, red snake tail and brown furred body were concealed beneath his white shirt, black trousers and cape. He towered ten feet over the pegasus, but she showed no fear as her attention was on the bag over his shoulder. She took a long whiff of the air.

"Aw, man!" she exclaimed, licking her lips. "Smells good!"

"Easy, Rainbow Dash," Discord said as he held the mare back with his paw. "You'll get your share in time."

Rainbow Dash followed her master into the castle and down a long hall. When he came to large room with a grand staircase, he called out:

"Dinnertime, ladies!"

A door burst open and a pink, poofy-haired earth pony in a magenta gown whizzed into the room. A white unicorn with an elegantly curled purple mane appeared on the upstairs landing and clapped her hooves when she saw the burlap sack.

"Ooh!" she squealed as she rushed down the stairs, taking care not to trip on her blue skirts. "Finally! I'm famished!"

"What'd you bring us?!" the pink pony asked eagerly. "What'd you bring us?! Goat? Sheep? Lynx?"

"Bear," Discord replied, putting down the sack.

The pink mare licked her lips. "Mmm, my favorite!"

The unicorn sniffed the air. "Oh, it smells divine!"

"What are we waiting for?" Rainbow said, reaching for the bag's opening. "Let's dig in!"

She cried out as the unicorn slapped her hoof away.

"What was *that* for, Rarity?" the pegasus said as she rubbed her hoof.

"We're supposed to share!" the pink pony said, narrowing her blue eyes.

"Pinkie Pie's right," Rarity said, crossing her hooves. "Just because we're vampires doesn't mean we should be rude."

"Yeah but…" Rainbow licked her lips as she stared at the bag, her red-violet eyes turning even redder. "I'm so *thirsty* !"

"Patience, Rainbow," Discord said with a grin. "We have to make sure every pony gets their share." He glanced around. "Where is Applejack? This is supposed to be her job!" He put his paw and claw to his mouth as he called out, "Applejack!"

After saying her name five more times, the pony rushed onto the upstairs landing. Applejack was an orange earth mare with a straw-colored mane. She wore a simple green gown like Pinkie's and Rarity's.

"Where have you been?" Discord shouted accusingly.

"Sorry, Master," Applejack called, leaning over the barrister. "I was with Twilight." Her face turned solemn. "She's gotten worse."

The anger vanished from Discord's face. He was silent for a moment before he said:

"Take me to her."

"But what about dinner?" Rainbow demanded as Pinkie and Rarity followed their master up the stairs.

"Rainbow!" the unicorn snapped, sending her a disappointed glare.

The pegasus glanced back longingly at the sack. Then she sighed and joined the others.

Applejack took them to a small windowless bedroom. Inside, a small purple dragon with green spines stood at a laced canopy bed, holding the hoof of a lavender unicorn mare. Her dark blue mane was disheveled, her cheeks were sunken in, her eyes were surrounded with wrinkles and her forelegs were covered in bandages.

"I've tried everything," Applejack explained to her master. "I've tried blood transfusions, I've been giving her extra food, I even tried Zecora's all-natural remedy! But she's only gotten worse, Master." She looked gravely at the unicorn in the bed. "I think…we might've taken too much from her."

Discord stepped slowly towards the bed. The dragon quickly let go of the unicorn's hoof and backed away.

"Twilight?" Discord called softly.

The unicorn lifted her eyelids as if they were giant boulders. Her half-opened purple eyes gazed up at the draconequus.

"How are you feeling, Twilight?"

"Light-headed," she breathed.

Her voice was so quiet that the regularly trained ear couldn't pick it up. Fortunately, vampires were gifted with incredible hearing. The dragon, on the other hand, had to lean forward to hear.

"Ah, yes," Discord nodded. "That is understandable, considering."

"I'm sorry, Master," Twilight whispered. "I have failed you."

"No, my dear," he replied calmly as he bent over to brush his claw against her cheek. "You've served your purpose well. You gave us all you could."

"I just wanted…to know…"

"And you shall." He leaned closer and whispered, "You've helped us in this life, now you can help us in the next."

She looked up at him pleadingly. "Help me…"

"Don't worry, dear Twilight," he said assuredly as he cupped her chin. "Your suffering will end soon."

He glanced at the four mares in the doorway. Their faces dawned in realization at what he was about to do. Applejack gave the dragon a gentle push as they filed out of the room. As the door closed, they could see their master's head leaning towards Twilight's neck.

They heard a small gasp and Rarity winced. The dragon put his claws to his mouth and looked up at the mares in horror. He shook his head pleadingly and tears came to his green reptilian eyes when Applejack returned his headshake.

The door opened and Discord came out. His mouth was fresh with blood, which he began licking clean with his forked tongue.

"Master," Rarity said in a shaky voice, "is she…?"

Discord nodded. "Make sure she has something to drink tomorrow."

All of them sighed in relief. Discord took out a key and turned the lock in the door.

"No one is to disturb her until she is awake," he commanded coolly as he tucked the key back into his cape pocket. He glanced down at the dragon. "Especially you, Spike."

The dragon nodded in understanding. Discord turned to the mares.

"Someone has to go into town tomorrow. I'm sure you know what to get."

The four nodded.

"Master," Rainbow said cautiously, "if Twilight's going to be one of us now…where are we gonna get our extra blood?"

"Well," Discord replied slowly, "there is now but one beating heart in this castle."

They all turned to Spike, whose face became as pale as theirs.

"No," Applejack said firmly, moving protectively in front of the dragon. "He's too young. He could barely handle giving blood to Twilight. And now that there are six of us, he can't possibly…"

"I'll do it."

The orange mare gaped at him. "Spike, you can't…"

He boldly straightened up. "If giving up some of my blood is necessary for your survival, I'll do it."

"Fortunately you won't need to tonight," Discord said as he walked down the hall. "Enjoy your bear, girls."

They all watched as their master turned the corner. His manner was cool and collected, as if what he had just done had not affected him. Rarity cocked her head at this observation.

"Can we drink now?" Rainbow asked impatiently.

"Alright, alright," Applejack grumbled as she nudged Spike down the hall. "You scooch off to bed, Spike."

"Right," the dragon squeaked as he ran towards his room.

He knew better than to be around while they were feeding.

"You think Twilight will be okay?" Rainbow questioned as they headed back downstairs. "Not every pony survives the transformation, and she didn't have a lot of blood left before…"

"She'll be fine," Pinkie said cheerfully, though it was clear she was nervous too. "Twilight's a tough cookie! After all, she's survived all these months giving us blood!"

"All this time she's been studying us," Applejack said in a cryptic tone, "now she's gonna be one of us."

"It's strange," Rarity said.

"What?" Rainbow asked. "Twilight being a vampire?"

"No, it's just…didn't you notice how… *detached* the master was when he…?"

"Oh yeah," Pinkie said, cocking her head in thought. "He *did* seem strangely calm about it."

"Well, it's not the first time he's changed some pony," Rainbow said, gesturing to herself.

"But we've known Twilight much longer than he knew any of us," Applejack reminded her. "Then again, she's been weak for a while. Maybe he's been preparing for it."

"Yes, but I thought that maybe…" Rarity paused and shook her head. "Oh, never mind. It's silly."

"Come on, Rarity!" Pinkie pressed. "Tell us!"

"We won't judge," Applejack assured her.

"Well…" Rarity stammered, "it's just…haven't you noticed the master's been awfully…distant, lately?"

"What do ya mean?" Rainbow asked. "He's always keeping to himself."

"I mean more than usual. He spends all day and all night in his room and only comes out to hunt. Then when he comes back with dinner, he goes straight to his room."

"He does seem to spend a lot more time alone these days," Applejack reflected. "What's that got to do with Twilight?"

"Well…I've been thinking…maybe the master is a bit…lonely."

"Lonely?" Pinkie huffed. "How can he be lonely? He's got us!"

"No, I mean he…oh, you wouldn't understand, Pinkie."

"Go on, Rarity," Applejack urged.

The unicorn sighed. "I was only thinking…with Twilight talking so much with the master…maybe she…that is…him and her…"

The three of them widened their eyes and said, "Oh."

Rarity shook her head. "Of course, I could be worrying over nothing. But…well, the master has been doing this for much longer than we have. He's sure to be getting tired after a thousand years. Maybe what he needs is to…settle down and…"

"I doubt that's gonna happen, Rarity," Rainbow interjected. "I mean if the master *did* want to settle down, don't you think he would've picked one of us ages ago?"

"It's not that simple, Rainbow Dash," Applejack said, her voice cracking as she considered Rarity's theory. "You know he can't just pick any old female. There are rules…"

Rainbow huffed in annoyance as they reached the bottom of the stairs. "Whatever. Can you just do your thing so we can drink already? That blood's probably half dried up by now!"

The orange mare glared at the pegasus as she dragged the sack containing the bear corpse toward the kitchen.

Yes, this is Fluttercord... Another reason I wanted to get away from "The Princess and the Unicorn." My Fluttercord needs haven't been met!

I hope no one hates me for making the Mane 6 blood-sucking vampires. Actually, their inclusion was partially inspired by the three vampire maidens in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* , which I finally read this summer (that story is NOT romantic). They are not with Discord for the same reasons though. For this story, Discord's going to have some chaotic powers but is not going to teleport (he has much more interesting ways of getting around).

Also, these ponies are not going to walk around naked. I don't know, I imagine the setting for this story better with all of them

wearing clothes.

Now to explain the puns:

Tramplevania was adopted from an Equestrian map I found on google.

Caprathian Mountains is a play on the Carpathian Mountains (the actual mountain range in Transylvania), using the Romanian word *capră* , meaning "goat" or a type of horse (I think).

Zebiu (zei-byew) is a ponified version of the city of Sibiu, the name combined with the word "zebu," a type of cow (best pun I could come up with).

Bullarest is a play on Bucharest, the modern capital of Romania.

The Romane refers to the Roma, an ethnic group in Romania. You know them better as "gypsies," but most of them find that offensive and prefer to be called Roma or Roms. So in narration I will say "Romane" and only use "gypsies" when a character is making an insult.

Doamnă and domnişoară mean "madam" and "miss." Well, all the films I've seen take place in France use "monsieur" and "mademoiselle," so why not use the Romanian versions?

Gowns and Garlic

You know you chose the right story when you finish a new chapter the next day! Also, it's actually convenient I started this with the Halloween season fast approaching.

Fluttershy cocked at her reflection in the mirror. She was wearing a red velvet gown with a laced collar and a ruffled skirt.

"This is the latest fashion!" said the store owner, Sassy Saddles. "All the mares in Bullarest are wearing it!"

"It's perfect!" Starlight declared.

"Um," Fluttershy murmured, massaging her side. "It's a bit…tight."

"Well," Sassy said in thought, "I could expand the waistline…"

"Don't be silly!" Starlight chimed. "It makes you look slimmer, darling! When Lord Fancy Pants sees you this Friday evening, why, I wouldn't be surprised if he proposed to you then and there!"

"W-what about Count Trenderhoof?" Fluttershy stammered.

Her aunt waved her hoof. "It never hurts to have a backup plan. Oh, don't worry if they both end up proposing. I'll make the decision for you." She turned to the dressmaker. "We'll take it. Just cut out some holes for her wings."

"Can do," Sassy Saddles proudly said as she levitated a pin cushion with her horn. "I just need to mark the position of her wings. Oh, hold still, dear! I don't want to prick you!"

That wasn't why Fluttershy was so stiff. The thought of her aunt choosing between two fiancés was overwhelming her. What if she liked one better and her aunt picked the other? Didn't she get a say in this at all?

Sassy Saddles turned away when the door to the shop opened. "Be right back, domnişoară! Don't move!"

Fluttershy couldn't see the customer in the mirror (she assumed it was at a bad angle), so she turned her head slightly toward the door. It was a white unicorn in a light blue dress, her mane tucked away in a white headscarf. She seemed hesitant to leave the doorway, even though Sassy Saddles was greeting her with open hooves.

"Rarity, come in, darling!" The white unicorn finally stepped inside and they kissed each other's cheeks. "And what brings you here today? More fabric, I wager?"

"Yes, yes," Rarity replied. "Something violet. Oh, but not *quite* violet, something darker…"

"I'll see what I can find in the back. One moment!"

The blue unicorn mare disappeared into the back room. As she waited, Rarity's eyes began to wander. Then she finally took notice of Fluttershy and gasped in horror.

"Good heavens, darling!" she cried, racing up to her. "You're not going to buy *that* , are you?"

"Well, actually…" Fluttershy uttered.

"Of course, we are," Starlight interrupted in annoyance. "What of it?"

Rarity put her hoof to her mouth. "Oh, no, no, no, *no* , domnişoară! This simply won't do!"

Starlight's jaw dropped. "Excuse me, but who do you think you…?"

"Oh, don't get me wrong. It's a lovely dress, but it just doesn't go with your complexion! And it's obviously too tight for you. And what are these?" She touched the velvet skirts. "Ruffles? No, no, no! You need something freer, more elegant! Straight, but flowing! Much like your mane."

Fluttershy blushed as she ran her hoof through her mane. "You

really think…?"

"Aha!" Rarity cried as she levitated a long green dress off the rack. "I believe *this* is more your style! Simple, but elegant."

She had described it correctly. This dress had a smooth skirt with loosely puffed, mid-length sleeves. And it was green, her favorite color.

"Oh my," Fluttershy said, reaching out to it. "It *is* quite…"

"Thank you, domnişoară," Starlight said between her teeth, standing between her niece and the gown, "but we do not require your…"

"Now what's all this about?" Sassy Saddles called as she returned with several rolls of purple fabric hovering beside her.

"Sassy," Rarity said with a grin, "don't you think this gown here is more suitable for this mare than *that* old thing?"

The dressmaker looked between the green gown and Fluttershy. "It *does* go better with her complexion." She rubbed her chin. "Which do you prefer, domnişoară?"

Fluttershy jumped when she realized Sassy was addressing her. "Well, um…I'd like to try it on…"

She trailed off when she caught her aunt's stern glare. Sassy didn't seem to notice.

"Well, go on and try it!" she said gleefully, handing her the gown.

Fluttershy grinned as she ran eagerly behind the screen, her aunt gaping in appalment. Sassy groaned as she turned to Rarity.

"Honestly, Rarity! Every time you come in here, it's like you're trying to steal my job!"

"Oh no," the white unicorn said with a longing sigh. "I'm not in the fashion business anymore. Still, I can't bear to see an unhappy mare in a dress."

"Yes, well," Sassy coughed, bringing forth the rolls of fabric. "Which color would you like? Plum? Sangria? Wine? Eggplant?"

"While I'm not too fond of the name," Rarity said, scrunching her nose, "the eggplant would bring out her eyes."

"Oh, so this is another gown for a friend? This must be the fourth time! You sure you're not going into business again?"

Rarity frowned. "I wish, Sassy. I wish."

When she had made her purchase, she exited the shop carrying the roll of eggplant fabric. As she trotted down the street, many stallions turned to leer at her. She lowered her head and pulled her scarf tighter to conceal as much of her face as possible.

Rarity used to love walking down the street and having all eyes on her. Being the fairest of fillies in her day, she was always showered with attention. But nowadays, being out in broad daylight was like being on display. Even the houses seemed to be staring at her with their downcast windows.

Despite popular belief, vampires could survive in the sunlight as long as they were in their pony form. Still, Rarity didn't like to be out where every pony, especially the stallions, could see her. The looks they gave her were heated with such desire that she might as well be burning to a crisp.

One stallion whistled, which enraged her so much that she snapped her head around and glared at him long and hard, her eyes turning red, as if to say: *Try anything and you're lunch!*

The stallion seemed to get the message, for he turned his attention to a fruit stall, his hooves shaking.

"Pig," Rarity snorted as she continued down the street.

She came to a small, rundown building that one would've thought abandoned had it not been for the various charms hanging over the door. Rarity knocked and listened.

"Come in, my dear," a deep female voice called. "I am in here."

Rarity opened the door and stepped into a strangely decorated room. The walls were adorned with tacky clay masks and tasteless jewelry (in Rarity's opinion) and the tables covered with assorted talismans, herbs and decorative eggs. In the middle of the room, a zebra in a flowered headscarf sat at a round table draped in a purple cloth.

"Ah," she said with a smile. "Rarity, what a delight! How is your dear friend, Twilight?"

"Not so good, Zecora," said Rarity grimly, sitting across from the zebra. "We need another one of your talismans."

Zecora's grin disappeared. "I see." She stood up and went to a cupboard. "If your coven keeps growing, this city will be overflowing with blood-drinking mares. If you weren't tame, I'd have more despair."

"Master *had* to bite her," Rarity insisted. "She was near death."

"At least you feed only on animals in the wood," Zecora said as she took out a string of garlic which made the vampire recoil in disgust. "You steer clear of the city, and that is good."

Rarity bit her lip and glanced down at her hooves. "Yes, well…it wouldn't be right, you know? I mean…we were all ponies once, except for the master."

The zebra searched a drawer below the cupboard and produced a round metal bauble resembling a cage. She then took out a thin cord and knife and brought all the items to the table. Rarity scooched her chair back when she set the garlic down. Zecora used the knife to cut a small piece off a clove. The smell it emitted made the vampire writhe in her seat and hold her nose.

Zecora then opened the metal bauble like a locket and placed the piece of garlic inside. Then she brought the bauble to her eye-level and stuck out her tongue as she carefully strung the black cord through the metal hole and tied the ends together.

"I picked this fresh this today," she said as she removed her scarf to

wrap the charm inside. "For at least a week, its power will stay. If Twilight struggles with her transformation, this should put her into sedation."

"Thank you, Zecora," Rarity said as she hesitantly took the bundle with her magic. "Now remember, not a word of this to any pony."

The zebra grinned. "You're a vampire, I'm a witch. Who am I to snitch? Now, as for my pay…"

"I know what you're going to say." The unicorn winced. "Oh, poo, now you have *me* doing it." She levitated a small vial of red violet liquid from her satchel and placed it in Zecora's hooves. "One vial of vampire blood, as always."

The witch squinted at the tiny bottle and nodded in approval. "I will need this for my next brew." She tucked the vial away. "Pleasure doing business with you."

"Again, thank you," Rarity said as she rose up and trotted out the door. "Oh, and I'll be sure to return your scarf!"

She didn't see where she was going, as she was still levitating the fabric. She bumped into Fluttershy and Starlight as a result.

"Oh, *pardon* !" Rarity exclaimed.

Starlight glared as the white unicorn passed by and grunted, "Riffraff."

"Err, Doamnă Glimmer?" called the gentlecolt servant, a white earth stallion with long bangs hanging over his eyes. "How many more shops are we going to?" He looked up at the unstable tower of boxes on his back. "I'm not sure how much more I can carry."

"We just need one more thing, Double Diamond," Starlight Glimmer said in a cheerful tone, as if she didn't notice the stallion's uneasiness. "We need a necklace to go with Fluttershy's gown."

"Oh," Fluttershy said quietly. "I think the dress looks fine without…"

"You wouldn't let me choose the gown, darling. At least let me help

you with the accessories."

A small filly in an orange headscarf obstructed their path. She was carrying a basket of daffodils, holding one up to Fluttershy.

"Buy a flower, domnişoară?" she asked sweetly.

Fluttershy smiled and leaned forward to sniff the flower when her aunt pulled her away sharply.

"Off with you, you filthy gypsy!" she spat bitterly.

The filly recoiled in fear and skittered away.

"That wasn't very nice, Auntie," Fluttershy said. "She was only selling flowers."

"They just use that as a distraction," Starlight insisted, her voice filled with hatred. "You're too busy ogling at their flowers to notice that they're robbing you blind!"

"But she was only a filly…"

"They're all the same! Even if that filly was abandoned by her parents and wasn't taught their lifestyle, the blood of a thief still runs through her veins. They can't change who they are."

Fluttershy wanted to respond that she didn't think that was true about any kind of pony, but she didn't want to start an argument. Her aunt was angry enough as it was. She felt guilty for trying on that dress and insisting that they buy it. Her aunt never liked it when she stepped out of line.

Oh, she wished she wasn't such a timid, frightened filly. It would be so much easier to stand up to her aunt without fear of upsetting her.

When Rarity returned to the castle, she picked the post off the doorstep and proceeded to the entrance hall where Applejack was carrying a crystal goblet of red liquid up the stairs. She turned when she heard the unicorn approaching.

"Did ya get it?"

Rarity nodded and held up the bundle containing the garlic charm. "Are you on your way to Twilight's room?"

"Yup," Applejack replied as the unicorn caught up with her.

"So she's awake already? Usually it takes at least twenty-four hours."

"When I changed, it took three days. Master Discord said my blood was being stubborn."

"I think mine took roughly a day and a half. I don't know. I was unconscious most of the time. I don't even remember being bitten."

"Lucky you," the earth mare said under her breath.

"I remember when you first came. We were surprised at how much restraint you had! When *I* woke up, all I could think of was blood!" Rarity glanced at the goblet. "Speaking of which, is that…Spike's?"

"Yup." Applejack was clearly not pleased with this fact. "The bear blood I saved from last night wasn't enough."

"Well, she didn't have much blood in her system to begin with." Rarity then levitated the eggplant fabric into view. "You think Twilight will look good in this color?"

The earth mare rolled her eyes. "Do ya have to make a new wardrobe for *every* new arrival?"

The unicorn turned up her nose. "Well, if we're going to be blood-drinking vampires, we might as well do it in style! Besides, she'll need clothing more suitable for transformations. As much as I love making dresses, what would be the point if they keep ripping every time our wings pop out?"

Applejack shrugged. "Fair enough."

When they reached Twilight's room, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie were waiting outside.

"What took you so long?" Rainbow demanded. "She's going nuts in there!"

The four of them jumped as they heard a crash behind the door, followed by the sounds of incessant flapping and hissing.

"Well, she's certainly getting the hang of those wings," Rarity observed.

"Hey, remember when *I* woke up?" Pinkie piped.

The three mares cringed at the memory.

"Oh," Rarity shivered. "It took forever to clean up that mess!"

"And fixing all those walls," Applejack reflected in horror. "She crumbled them flat!"

They were snapped out of their thoughts by another loud crash from Twilight's room.

"Tell me you've got the garlic charm!" Rainbow begged Rarity.

"Right here," the unicorn said, bringing out the bundle again. "This will keep her stable until she's grown out of her newborn stage."

"I'll put it on her," Applejack volunteered, placing it on the tray.

"Are you sure, darling?"

"You forget I'm not as afraid of this stuff as y'all are. You just go give the master his mail, Rarity."

"Well, if you're going to do it, I insist you wear gloves!"

Rarity used her magic to summon a pair of gloves from her room and placed them on Applejack's tray.

"Thanks."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" The unicorn took an envelope out of her satchel. "You have a letter from your sister."

Applejack said nothing as the envelope landed in her hoof. She stared at it grimly for a moment before slipping it in the bodice of her dress. She turned to the others as if she had forgotten it already.

"Pinkie, Rainbow, y'all hold Twilight down while I put on the charm and give her the drink."

Rainbow and Pinkie glanced at each other.

"Well," the latter said as she pulled a key out of her mane and put it in the door lock. "Round Two."

She and Rainbow charged in as soon as the door was open. Applejack walked in calmly after them. A hissy, hungry voice shouted:

"Blood! Blood! BLOOD!"

"Easy now, Twi," Applejack said as she closed the door behind her. "I've got yerr dessert right here."

Rarity left them to their business and continued down the hall. She dropped the fabric off in her room before going up the spiral stone stairway leading to the high tower, the master's quarters.

She knocked on the large metal door and called, "Master! It's me, Rarity!"

The door creaked open, but no one was standing there. The room was windowless, but that was not the most unusual thing about it. A grand piano was on the wall across, a wardrobe stood upside-down on the right, a bookshelf stuck horizontally out of the wall on the left, the books facing the floor yet not falling out; and a narrow black coffin sat on the ceiling.

"I see you've redecorated," Rarity said casually, addressing the coffin above her.

The casket swung open and Discord rose straight up (or dangled down, from Rarity's point of view), his cape wrapped around his body, giving him the appearance of a large, horned bat. His cape opened as he stretched out his arms and yawned, but it seemed to

defy gravity like the rest of the room and didn't fall to the floor.

"You better have a good reason for ruining my nap," he grumbled, crossing his arms.

"Well, for starters," Rarity began, "Twilight's awake."

"Is she now? That was quick. Has she been fed?"

"The others are doing that right now, and I got the charm from Zecora, so she should be calming down soon."

Discord nodded. "Good. Last thing we need is another incident. Pinkie almost drained half of Zebiu before we rounded her up!" He floated to the floor and turned himself right-side-up. "We were lucky Twilight didn't turn us in when she discovered us." He nodded at the bookshelf, causing several books to fly out and flap around the room. "Some ponies will do anything for a bit of knowledge."

Rarity coughed as she brought an envelope into view. "Master, I also have the post."

Discord groaned as he fell back on a fainting couch that had appeared in midair.

"What dire news do you bring this time?" he asked, dramatically putting his claw to his forehead.

The unicorn rolled her eyes at his behavior before replying, "Another letter from the Lady Starlight Glimmer."

"Ugh!" her master snorted. "Another invitation to meet her niece, I suppose?"

"Shall I toss it out, master?"

"No, go ahead and read it. We might get a good laugh."

Using her magic, Rarity opened the envelope, withdrew the letter and began to read aloud:

" *My Dear Count Discord* …"

"'My dear?'" he scoffed. "What does she take me for, an old lover?"

" *Since I have not received a reply to my last letter* …"

"Because you already sent like a hundred!"

"… *I once again extend my invitation for you to join my niece and myself for dinner. You name the place.* "

"I wouldn't mind inviting her to *be* dinner," Discord chuckled.

Rarity ignored that comment and continued, " *As you probably know from my previous letters, my niece, Fluttershy, has recently turned twenty and is one of the loveliest young mares in Zebiu, perhaps even in all of Tramplevania* ."

He huffed. "Unless she's seen all the mares in Tramplevania, I highly doubt it."

" *She is well educated and speaks Itailian, Germane and Prench.* "

"Oh, goodie! I won't be able to understand a word she says!"

" *She sings divinely and has been trained by a world-renown voice instructor* ."

"What part of the world? Lithumania?"

" *And her dowry measures up to* …"

"Stop!" He groaned as he dangled his arms over the couch in exasperation. "I'm all wisecracked out."

"Should I write a reply, Master?"

"No, have Rainbow Dash write it. She writes the best comebacks."

Rarity looked up from the letter and bit her lip at what she was about to suggest. "Master, would it hurt to at least… *meet* this mare?"

"What?!" Discord sat up in shock. "Are you out of your mind? Did you *read* that letter?"

"Oh, I realize the Lady Starlight may have exaggerated a bit, but… maybe it'd be… *good* for you, you know? I mean…you're not getting any younger…"

"Or older, for that matter."

"Yes, well…maybe it's time you started…meeting mares and…"

"Oh, no!" Discord shouted, wagging a finger. "We are *not* having this conversation again!"

"W-what do you mean… *again* , master?" Rarity stammered, trying to appear dubious.

" *You're* trying to convince me to find a mate again!" He put his hands to his head, growled and turned away in frustration. "I've told you, it would just end in disaster!"

"But surely you can stay in pony form long enough for…"

"You know very well I can't stay in my pony form as long as you mares!"

He faced her as his body shrank, taking the shape of a gray unicorn stallion with jet black hair and a blue horn.

"Say I *do* show up there for dinner? I can only keep the disguise up for an hour at most. When that hour's up…"

He grew back to his original form. "That pretty mare will take one look at me and scream."

"You don't know that'll happen, Master," Rarity insisted, though there was uncertainty in her voice. "After all, none of *us* find you frightful… most of the time."

"Yes, but you've all been my servants for years!" He turned his back to her again. "Not to mention you're all just as monstrous as I am. You just don't show it twenty-four seven!"

He looked at his paw and claw and sighed. "I've never seen my reflection, Rarity, but I know I'm hideous. By their standards, at

least. Even if I didn't look at this, what female would want to be with *me* , knowing what kind of creature I am?"

Rarity looked at her master with sympathy. She now felt guilty for bringing the matter up. The master only showed this side of himself with his closest friends, so only she and the others knew how sensitive he was about his appearance, and his accursed nature. The mares had learned to accept their fates, but Discord had been like this all his life. He never had to give anything up, and yet he wanted to be normal more than all five of the mares put together.

Discord quickly shook off his emotions and straightened up, acting as if he hadn't revealed anything deeply personal.

"Besides," he coughed. "No female has ever caught my eye, and I have seen *very* beautiful mares in my years."

He winked playfully at Rarity, who gave a small smile in return.

"You never know, Master. Maybe this mare could be the one."

Discord rolled his eyes as he kicked his legs up so he could hang upside down from the ceiling again. "You know how vampire mating laws work, Rarity. I can't just *choose* a mare. Otherwise, I might have married one of you years ago."

"That's what Rainbow Dash said. Still, how will you find the one you're destined for if you never meet any mares outside our coven?"

"What do you want me to do? Peek into every mare's bedroom window? I can't just walk out in broad daylight like you girls!" He crossed his arms and pouted. "I actually think changing you lot has done more repair than damage!"

She had to admit he had a point. As vampires, they were stronger and faster, giving them the ability to defend themselves and the independence that most mares were denied. They didn't have to be tied down by their parents or husbands, and if any pony stood in the way of them getting what they wanted…well, there were various ways to fix that.

"I still think you should at least try, Master," Rarity insisted. "I've

been worried that you might be lone…"

"I don't *need* a mate!" Discord barked as he swiveled his body around. "This conversation is over!"

"But Master…"

"Leave me!"

Rarity sighed sadly and obeyed her master. When Discord was certain he was alone, the anger in his face slowly transformed into solemnness. He flopped down (or up) into his pillowed coffin and stared up (or down) at the floor. The casket suddenly expanded horizontally, until it was big enough for two. He looked over at the empty space and sighed.

The unicorn was right. He *was* lonely. He had five vampires and a dragon to keep him company, but it wasn't the same. They were his servants. They couldn't comfort him during daylight hours when he slept. He couldn't hold them in his arms and…and…

He didn't know what he wanted. He had tried picturing the perfect female hundreds of times, but could never select one image. He couldn't even think of any specific personality traits, or if his mate would even be a pony (he was a mixture of a number of creatures, what did it matter?).

He was certain of one thing though. She would accept him. Every part of him. She wouldn't recoil in disgust at his appearance, or run away upon learning of his diet. She would love him no matter what.

Instead of filling him with hope, the dream only made him sadder, for such a female could never exist.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! Am I actually giving Rarity a *positive* portrayal? What do you know? I guess the last two episode have given me a newfound respect for her.

Fun fact: there ARE practicing witches in Romania, though I've never been to one myself, and are even considered legitimate

self-employed income earners, as they pay income tax (though some weren't too happy about that). Zecora is always mixing magical potions and cure-alls, so she seemed the most likely candidate for this sort of character. I just hope I didn't accidentally offend anyone (I don't know how many witches read this).

Some of you have been wondering about the inclusion of Starlight Glimmer as the "stepmother" figure. I don't know. I needed someone to tie Fluttershy down and try to conform her to society's standards and Starlight just...worked.

Now you see some of the alterations I've made to vampire characteristics. I have the mares able to go out in the sunlight because there were so many things they needed to get from town, and I couldn't imagine them sending Spike out alone (he'd have to go through the forest). Discord's a different case though. More on that later.

This is an alternate universe involving ponies, so I'm not striving for historical accuracy, though the period I have in mind is the late 19th century.

The houses in Sibiu really DO look like they're staring down at you!

For What Purpose?

So this chapter's mostly filler, but is still important.

Dear Sis,

How ya doing? It's been so long since you've last written. You should know Big Macintosh and Cheerilee had another foal, so things have been a lot busier here. They've named her Apple Blossom. You really should come see her. She's adorable.

Big Mac's still trying to get me a husband, but I keep telling him I wanna stay on the farm. Unless I meet some pony nice, I don't think I'm ever getting married. If I do, I want you to be the mare of honor. That is, if you bother to show up to my wedding.

I know you're busy working for that count, sis, but you haven't come to see us in ten years! Why don't you visit us anymore? I guess I should be glad you still write to me, but I miss talking with you face-to-face.

If you are *going to visit, you should hurry up, because Granny—*

"Hey, AJ!"

Applejack quickly wiped away the drops of blood streaming down her cheeks and turned away from her desk to face the rainbow pegasus in the doorway.

"Can I borrow a quill, ink and some paper?" Rainbow inquired. "I need to write a prank note for the master. I tried asking Twilight, but even with the charm on, she's become very…territorial."

"Oh, yeah, sure," Applejack said mechanically as she put a quill, inkwell and parchment to the side.

Rainbow flapped over to collect the items. As she picked them up,

she caught sight of the open letter on the desk. Applejack hastily covered it with her hooves.

"I can't believe after all these years," Rainbow said, shaking her head in pity, "you're *still* in contact with your family."

"I," Applejack gulped, "just like to see how they're doing."

The pegasus rolled her eyes. "AJ, you've been a vampire for twenty years now. You've got to leave your old life behind and move on."

"Easy for *you* to say," Applejack spat, snapping her head around. "You didn't *care* when *you* left *your* family!"

"They were gonna marry me off to an," she gagged, " *old guy* ! I was running away anyway!"

"Yeah," the earth pony snorted. "Admit it, Rainbow. You were *happy* to be changed!"

"Of course, I admit it! It's better than being tied down to a rich old geezer. And there was no way I was gonna have all the blood drained from me!"

"Yes, but you had a *choice* ! *You* had nothing to lose!" She looked down at the letter and whispered, "I did."

Rainbow's face fell, knowing she had gone too far. She gently put a hoof on the earth pony's shoulder.

"Hey," she spoke softly. "I'm sorry. But…you know you can't hold onto them forever, right? They're not immortal like us."

Applejack jerked her shoulder away and said in a quiet but firm voice, "Get out."

Rainbow knew better than to linger, so she flew out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her, allowing Applejack to finish her third read-through of the letter:

If you are *going to visit, you should hurry up, because Granny Smith hasn't been feeling well lately. She was tending the sheep yesterday*

and fainted in the middle of the field. She's been in bed ever since. I don't wanna sound pessimistic, but you know how old Granny Smith is. I'm sure she will feel better if she sees you again. We'd all *feel better if we could see you again.*

Love, Your Sister,

Apple Bloom

Applejack couldn't hold it back anymore. Her head fell into her hooves as blood started dripping from her eyes and onto the letter.

"ARGH!"

Her aunt's scream caused Fluttershy to look up from her book on etiquette in alarm. Starlight Glimmer was storming into the parlor in a fit of rage, glaring furiously at an opened envelope and letter hovering in front of her.

"Of all the nerve!" she huffed. "And he calls himself a count!"

"What's wrong, Auntie?" Fluttershy asked in concern.

" *This* !"

Starlight slammed the letter onto the table in front of her. Fluttershy leaned over to read it:

My dear Lady Starlight Glimmer,

Thank you for the invitation, but I'm afraid I'm going to have to decline, because…

YOU STINK!

Sincerely,

Count Discord

Fluttershy suppressed a chuckle. "Oh my."

"I've never been so insulted in all my life!" Starlight exclaimed, falling backward into an easy chair. "Some pony! Get me a glass of water! Now!"

Her voice must've been loud enough for the whole mansion to hear, for at that instant a dark blue pegasus mare with a white mane flew into the room carrying a glass of water on a tray.

"Thank you, Night Glider," Starlight heaved as she took a sip. "That is the *last* time I write to such a rude, arrogant…"

"Which one is Count Discord again?" Fluttershy couldn't help but ask.

"That old recluse who lives in that enormous castle in the middle of the forest?" Night Glider questioned. "Isn't he the one who never leaves his home and is rumored to be…insane?"

Fluttershy leaned forward in interest. "What do you mean?"

"Well…no pony's actually every *seen* him, except for the servants he keeps. Some say he refuses to come out because he's a hideous monster, or that he has an enormous scar on his face, or that he…"

"Nothing but silly rumors," Starlight said, waving her hoof dismissively. "The point is he's rich, of high station and has a splendid castle. I've been trying to get him to come to dinner for months, but after reading this letter, I'd rather marry my niece off to a baker!"

"Well, look on the bright side," Night Glider snorted. "You'll be getting a lifetime supply of free bread."

Fluttershy laughed along with her, until Starlight sent them a dangerous glare which made them hang their heads in silence.

"Well," Starlight huffed, using her magic to tear up the letter, "there's still Lord Fancy Pants and Count Trenderhoof. I wouldn't trust you living with a mysterious recluse anyway, Fluttershy."

Even though her words were harsh, Fluttershy couldn't help but feel relief that her aunt was rejecting a suitor for once. While she didn't

believe the rumors Night Glider had told them, she didn't think the count would be good for her if he kept to himself most of the time. Besides, the woods frightened her, and she shivered at the idea of living deep within them.

When the five vampire maidens entered their master's bedroom, he was sitting at the piano on the wall, leaning on his elbow and banging a single key with his eagle talon.

"Uh…Master?" Applejack called. "It's time to go hunt."

Discord paused for a moment, stared at them, and then returned to his one-note piece.

"Ahem," Rarity coughed. "Master! It's time to…"

"I heard you," he mumbled, still focused on the one piano key. "I'm not in the mood tonight."

"Come on, Master!" Rainbow Dash exclaimed. "We haven't eaten in three days!"

"We're *sooooooooo thirsty* !" Pinkie Pie whined.

"And I *really* don't want to draw blood from Spike again," Applejack said firmly, "so if you would just bring back a goat or something…"

"What would be the point?" Discord groaned. He fell backward so that he was hanging upside-down from the piano bench. "Night in, night out, it's the same routine. I kill an animal in the forest, bring it back for you to drink, then we all get thirsty again and I have to kill another animal for you to drink, and then after a while I bite some pony for some reason, we have another mouth to feed, I kill more animals and for *what* ?! What does it all amount to?"

Rainbow put her hoof to her head. "Ugh, I hate it when he gets all existential on us!"

"What's the point in us carrying on like this?" Discord continued as he held out his paw and claw to what, in his perspective, was the

ceiling. "What is the purpose of our existence? Are we but another insignificant link in the world's food chain? Are we mere predators who prey on the weak? We drink their blood to survive, but to what end if we can never die?"

"Ugh!" Pinkie moaned as she cradled her head. "All this philosophical thinking is making me dizzy!"

"Let *me* talk to him," said a voice.

The mares moved aside so the newly-changed unicorn could step forth. Twilight now looked in perfect health, though her lavender fur had become paler and her purple eyes had turned red. She no longer had bandages on her forelegs and her hair was combed and straight. She wore an eggplant gown that Rarity had made and the garlic charm around her neck.

She tilted her head towards the door. The others nodded in understanding and stepped outside to give the two some privacy. Once the door was shut, Twilight looked sternly at Discord.

"Master," she said slowly but firmly, "you know very well we can only go so long without blood. If I wasn't wearing this charm, I'd be going crazy right now. *I'm* not happy about drawing blood from Spike either, as that nearly killed *me* . Of course, I'm grateful that you saved my life, but Spike is too young to be losing so much blood and if we have to change him at his age…"

"Don't lecture me, Twilight!" Discord snapped as he flipped around so that he was kneeling on the side of the bench. "I'm well aware of the consequences! I'm just…in a sore mood tonight."

Twilight nodded. "Ah, yes. Rarity told me you were pining for a mate…"

With the speed of a panther, he leapt onto the floor with stuck his finger into the mare's chest "I am *not* …ow!" He cried out as he accidentally touched the garlic pendant. After shaking his sizzled finger, he narrowed his eyes and repeated, "I am *not* pining for a mate!"

"Then what's troubling you?"

Discord sighed as a window appeared in the wall beside him. He walked over to it and leaned on his elbows to look up at the night sky.

"I've been at this for a thousand years, Twilight," he moaned remorsefully, "and I still wonder why I was cursed with this life. Sometimes I think I might as well have burned in the sun like my mother intended. Some days I think of," he reached out his claw, "stepping out and just…ending it all."

The unicorn was astonished at this confession.

"Master," she said, slowly approaching him, "you mustn't talk like that. You *do* have a purpose in life." She placed her hoof on his back. "You've got us."

He smiled slightly. "You're all good company, yes." He frowned again. "But…it's just not enough. Sometimes I think you all would've been better off had you never met me. At least three of you wouldn't have to share my fate!"

"Hey. I *knew* what I was getting into when I agreed to donate my blood. I knew I wouldn't last long, but that whatever happened to me couldn't be any worse than the life I was leaving behind. Rainbow Dash and Pinkie did too. And Rarity and Applejack might not even be alive if you hadn't…"

"They'd be better off dead," Discord said gruffly as he walked away from the unicorn, making the window vanish. "They're barely even alive."

Twilight watched her master pensively. "Maybe you *do* need a mate. You say you're looking for some meaning in your vampirism. Perhaps you'd find that meaning if you had an eternal companion. We're all loyal to you, but we can't give you love, can we? Not romantic love, anyway. After all, vampires can't simply choose their mate."

Discord hung his head and whispered, "They are only destined for

one. My former master told me. The moment you see them, you just…know."

Twilight smiled as she touched his back again. "You'll find her someday. But neither of us will live to see that day unless you get us something to drink. If you won't do it for yourself, do it for us." She paused. "Unless of course, you'd prefer that we hunt for our *own* food…"

Discord wheeled around in appalment and then narrowed his eyes at her. Twilight grinned in triumph, for she knew the reason Discord did all the hunting was so the five of them could be responsible for as few deaths as possible.

"You're evil," he grunted in annoyance.

She shrugged. "I'm a vampire now. What did you expect?"

This is what I get for taking a class on absurdism, which requires you to question everything about life.

In case you don't know, Night Glider is the pegasus from "The Cutie Map."

At First Sight

I've been trying to get into the habit of writing 1000 words a day (sometimes more), which is why I've been updating so often lately. This chapter needed special attention, however.

"Well, I think that dinner went rather well, don't you?" Starlight Glimmer asked her niece on the carriage ride home. "I'd say Lord Fancy Pants is greatly interested in you."

Fluttershy stroked her bunny as she reflected on the evening. She was glad her aunt had allowed her to bring Angel for comfort, as long as he stayed in the carriage.

"He's nice, I suppose," she replied softly, "and he was quite the gentlecolt, but…"

Starlight raised an eyebrow. " *But* ?"

Fluttershy bit her lip. "Well…we don't really…have all that much in common. I mean we barely talked…"

"That's not important in marriage," her aunt huffed, waving her hoof. "You'll be too busy bringing up the children to *talk* ."

Fluttershy didn't like what her aunt was implying with this. She did notice Lord Fancy Pants stealing glances at her all evening, and he was kind enough to ask about her, but their conversations never went anywhere. In fact, her aunt had hardly let her get a word in, and she would occasionally make adjustments to her hair and posture and harshly whisper for her to smile.

Was that what courtship was all about? Standing there and looking pretty? Did stallions only care about looks, wealth and social status? From what her aunt was telling her, Fluttershy was starting to believe this.

While she did sometimes think about having children, she'd always thought the husband she'd have them with would be…

She wasn't quite sure. Kind? Caring? She at least wanted some pony she could talk to. Angel was a good listener, and even though she could understand him enough, he could never *really* talk back. She wanted some pony to confide in, some pony who would comfort her in her troubles. She didn't just want a husband. She wanted…a friend.

A long howl interrupted her thoughts. Angel's ears perked up in alarm. Even Starlight jumped at the sound. They all looked out at the dark, foggy forest.

"Oh," Starlight uttered with a shiver. "This forest always gives me the shivers."

For once, she and Fluttershy agreed on something. Starlight leaned out the window and called to the stallions pulling the carriage.

"Pick up the pace! I don't want to get eaten by wolves!"

"Yes, doamnă!" exclaimed Double Diamond and a unicorn named Party Favor as they trotted faster.

There was another howl in the distance, which made Angel quiver in Fluttershy's lap.

"C-Calm down, Angel," she said shakily. "I-It's just a wolf. He's too far away to…"

She gasped at another howl and before she knew it, the rabbit was jumping out the carriage window.

"Angel!" Fluttershy cried as she swung the door open.

"Fluttershy, what are you…?"

But Starlight wasn't quick enough to stop Fluttershy from hopping off the carriage to race after her bunny.

"Fluttershy! You silly filly!" She addressed the stallions. "Stop the

carriage! One of you! Go after her!"

By the time Party Favor had unhitched himself, Fluttershy was already deep within the fog, not caring what was lurking within as she was determined to get her bunny back.

Somewhere in the fog wandered a lone brown goat. He didn't look unusual at a glance, until one saw his yellow and red eyes. The goat then transformed into Count Discord.

"Rats, has it been an hour already?" he grumbled in annoyance. "What, are all the animals hibernating early this year?!"

He was hoping taking the form of a goat would lure out some predators, but they didn't seem particularly active tonight, except for the wolves. He couldn't harm them, for they always traveled in packs.

He considered infiltrating a farm again to steal a goat or sheep. He rarely did this, as missing livestock often aroused suspicion. Still, he couldn't return home empty-pawed.

Then he heard a twig snap and he turned to see a white rabbit hopping out of the fog. He squeaked when he saw Discord and twisted in the other direction.

"Oh no, you don't."

With a single swipe of his paw, he grabbed the bunny by the ears and lifted him to his eye level.

"Well, you're not much of a meal," Discord smirked, "but you'll do for now."

The rabbit was putting up a fight, punching the air with his paws and kicking his feet, squeaking insults at the draconequus. Discord shook his head and laughed.

"You're a feisty one," he said, lifting the bunny's chin with his talon so he could make eye contact. "Why don't you relax a little?"

His voice became smooth and hypnotic as his eyes transformed into spirals. The rabbit watched them intensely.

"That's it," Discord whispered as the bunny's eyes changed to match his. "Relax. This won't hurt a bit."

He opened his mouth to show his fangs.

The fog was so thick that Fluttershy had lost sight of her bunny.

"Angel!" she called repeatedly. "Angel, where are you? Come back! Angel!"

She felt like she was running in circles, for everything looked the same. Finally, she stopped and cried, thinking she had lost her precious bunny forever.

Then she heard a low voice in the distance. Thinking whoever it was might have seen Angel, she followed it. Her blood grew cold as she came across a tall, dark figure holding something over his fanged mouth. She gasped when she realized it was Angel, his body limp and his eyes swirling into infinity.

"Angel!"

Without thinking, Fluttershy raced toward the creature and shouted, "Let go of my bunny!"

Discord turned in surprise. Before he could see what was coming towards him, he was rammed into the side and tackled to the ground. The rabbit fell out of his grasp and snapped out of his trance. Angel ran away instinctively.

Discord snarled in anger and pushed himself up. Fluttershy scrambled off him before she could fall off. He turned and glared at her with glowing yellow and red eyes, stealing the mare's breath away.

"You shouldn't have done that, domnişoară," he growled dangerously.

The fog had cleared a bit and she could see him better in the faint moonlight. Her mouth dropped agape as she took in every detail of his mismatched body. What sort of creature *was* this?!

Discord was furious. Not only had this mare made him lose his meal, but she had *attacked* him! He, who had wrestled the mightiest of predators, had just been overpowered by a meek, mortal *mare* !

Fluttershy didn't feel so brave anymore, now that the frightening creature was crawling towards her.

"That rabbit was going to be my dinner!" Discord barked as she backed away from him. "Now that he's gone, I'll need something else to satisfy my thirst."

By now, Fluttershy had backed into a tree. She was sure he was going to pounce on her, but instead, he put his claw to his chin in thought.

"Now, let's see," he said as he glanced at his surroundings. "Why, the only tasty morsel around here seems to be," he looked back at her hungrily, " *you* ."

He grabbed her forelegs before she could slip away. He pressed her back against the tree and rose to his full height. Fluttershy wanted to scream, but she was trembling so much, she couldn't find her voice.

"There are two ways this can go down, domnişoară," Discord said with a wicked smile. "I could drain all the blood from you and leave you for dead, or I can drink *some* of your blood, which won't kill you, but my venom will still be in your veins."

Her breath quickened as he ran his claw along her chin and whispered, "You'll become like me and live forever."

Fluttershy now understood what this creature was. She had heard the servants talk about vampires all the time, but she'd always thought they were a myth. Yet here was one, standing before her, contemplating whether to kill her or change her.

She didn't know which fate was worse.

"What will it be, domnişoară?"

His grin widened as he showed his teeth, his large fangs glinting in the moonlight. Fluttershy closed her eyes and whimpered, prepared for whatever the vampire had in store for her.

Discord took her silence as an acceptance of death and sighed. "Pity."

He opened his mouth and aimed for her throat. Fluttershy's eyes tightened as she felt him draw closer.

Then something made him stop. The clouds that had covered the moon had moved on, allowing it to shine down on the mare shivering in his grasp, giving him the chance to look at her properly.

Her long hair was the color of pink roses, and fell down neatly over her shoulders. Her coat was yellow like buttercream, giving her face a delicate look.

His grip on her loosened as he looked down at her dress, which was a simple green gown, yet it suited her soft complexion well. He couldn't say the same about the extravagant emerald necklace around her neck, as it distracted from the natural beauty of her face, to which his attention slowly returned.

Confused as to why he had stopped, Fluttershy opened her eyes to find him staring intently at her, his red pupils dilated. One fang had disappeared entirely, while the other had only shrunk to a less intimidating size.

Her teal eyes shone in the darkness like sparkling jades. They beheld such innocence, such brilliance, that the tables were soon turned as Discord was the one put in a trance.

In all the years he had lived, of all the mares he had bitten, he had never seen such beauty. He didn't know why, but everything about her had him mesmerized: her gentle face, her smooth mane, her dazzling eyes. He couldn't help but brush his claw against her cheek and take a few strands of hair between his talons. It was like touching the softest of silk.

"Beautiful," he whispered.

Fluttershy stiffened at his voice, as it was filled with wonderment like his gaze. Her terrified mind was telling her to try and escape while he was distracted, but the eyes staring into her soul and the rapid beating of her heart had her rooted to the spot.

A glorious scent filled Discord's nostrils. It wasn't blood, but something richer and sweeter. It was like jasmine, petunias, roses, every flower he could think of, all of it emitting from the pegasus.

He was no longer thirsty. All he could think about was the beautiful mare before him, and his desire to hold her to his chest, lift her face up to his, lean forward and…

An electric shock from the mare's skin made him jump back in surprise. He released her, causing her to drop to the ground. He stared down at his claw in revelation and then looked back at her. She was gazing at him with equal amazement.

That shock had been the final sign. If he hadn't known already, he knew now.

The mare he'd been hoping for, the mare he'd been waiting a thousand years for was standing before him now.

"It's you," he whispered in disbelief.

"W-What?" Fluttershy stammered.

Before he could answer, a voice called out of the fog, "Domnişoară!"

They both turned in the direction of the voice. Discord looked back at her in panic. What should he do? He couldn't let her go now that'd he'd finally found her, but he couldn't touch her either. He couldn't have her going off and telling ponies about him, but he couldn't erase her memory. He wanted to explain why he was hesitant to kill her, but she was as confused enough as it was.

"Domnişoară, are you here?!"

Discord had no choice. He leaned toward the mare and whispered:

"If you tell anyone about tonight, I *will* find you."

And he would.

"W-Wait," Fluttershy said as he turned away, his cape sweeping after him. "Who are…?"

She stopped as the vampire took off and changed into a dark blue bat before her eyes. She watched him in bewilderment as he disappeared into the fog.

"Domnişoară!" Party Favor shouted as he emerged from the darkness. "Oh, thank goodness! Are you alright, domnişoară?"

Fluttershy was breathing heavily, her eyes still focused on where the vampire had vanished.

"Domnişoară?" the unicorn repeated. "What happened, are you hurt?"

It wasn't until Angel hopped into her lap that she snapped out of her trance.

"Fine, I…" she heaved, "I fell."

Party Favor sighed in relief. "Oh, good. Not because you fell, but you weren't hurt and… Oh, we better get back to the carriage. Your aunt is going to have a fit."

Fluttershy didn't care about her aunt at the moment. She was going through a whirlwind of emotions, but she was mostly overwhelmed with what had just happened. That creature was about to suck her blood, but then had stopped for some reason. Why? He had had her cornered. His fangs had been inches away from her throat. He could've killed her easily.

Why had he let her go?

Discord was panting heavily as he slammed the large double doors behind him and fell back against them.

"Hey, what gives?" Rainbow Dash called as she, the other mares and Spike came rushing down the hall. "Where's the grub?"

"I thought you said you were hunting!" Rarity exclaimed.

"I'm *thirsty* !" Pinkie whined.

"Did our earlier conversation lead you *nowhere* ?!" Twilight demanded accusingly.

"Am I gonna have to give blood again?" Spike asked nervously.

"No way!" Applejack declared, throwing her hoof in front of him. "Master, he needs a few more days to heal before he can…"

But Discord didn't hear a word they said. He only stared into space as he reflected on the recent events.

"Hey, are you *listening* ?!" Rainbow shouted in his face.

"Master?" Rarity said, cocking her head in question.

"Hello!" Pinkie chimed, jumping up and waving her hoof in front of his eyes. "Master! Anybody home?"

"What's the matter with him?" Rainbow whispered to the others.

"Maybe he's sick?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Pinkie," Twilight snorted. "Vampires don't get sick. Unless they're exposed to garlic for too long."

Pinkie gasped in horror. "Did you crash into an evil garlic tree?!"

The lavender unicorn put her hoof to her head. "Garlic doesn't grow on *trees* !"

"Master, what happened out there?" Applejack demanded softly. "Master?"

"I've seen her," Discord said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Huh?" everyone said in confusion.

His lips curled into a smile as he sighed and clutched his chest. "I've seen the face of beauty."

"The *what* of *what* now?" Rainbow asked.

"Hold up!" Rarity exclaimed as she stepped forth. She squinted at the draconequus and gasped. "Oh my gosh! You've *met* some pony, haven't you?!"

Discord nodded as he sank to the ground in bliss. "She was the most beautiful creature I've ever laid eyes on. And she looked so… so gentle and so…so delicate. She was like…like…" He sighed as he closed his eyes. "Like an *angel* ."

"What?" Rainbow said, scrunching her nose. "Angel? What are ya talking about?"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Oh, honestly, Rainbow Dash! Isn't it obvious?" She squealed in delight. "He's fallen in love!"

"Huh, what?" Discord said, snapping back to reality. "Love? I…I don't know about that, I mean…I only saw her for a minute…" He sighed again. "Though it felt like an eternity."

"Well, you're *smitten* , at least."

"Ooh, how cute!" Pinkie squeaked, bringing her face close to her master's. "Tell us all about it!"

"Yes, details, please!" Rarity begged eagerly.

Discord stood as he began telling his tale. "I was having no luck finding food, until I stumbled upon a rabbit…"

" *Rabbit* ?!" Rainbow exclaimed in anger. "You were gonna bring us back a *rabbit* ?!"

"Shush!" Rarity hushed her. "Go on, Master!"

"Well," Discord continued, "I was *about* to feed on it, but then out of nowhere, this…beautiful pegasus mare came out of the fog and tackled me…"

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Rainbow interrupted again, holding up a hoof. "You were tackled by a *mare* ? A *mortal* mare?!"

"I know, right?" he sighed dreamily. "She was so…bold! Anyway, I lost the rabbit, so I was about to feed on her instead, but then I got a better look at her and…"

He paused as the lovely image of the mare came to mind.

"What color was her mane?" Rarity demanded.

"Pink," Discord replied automatically. "And it was as soft as silk!"

"Her coat?"

"Yellow. No, more of a buttery color. Oh, and it was so smooth…"

"Her eyes?"

"They were like jades. Oh, and how they twinkled in the moonlight…"

"What's her name?" Pinkie pleaded, standing on the tips of her hooves.

Discord opened his mouth and then froze. He smacked himself in the forehead.

"Darn it!"

He took a deep breath and reacquired his dreamy expression.

"Her name is Aphrodite, Venus… No! Persephone! She smelled like springtime…"

"Springtime?" Twilight said as she rubbed her chin in thought. "Master, when you touched her, did anything happen?"

"Oh," Discord said, looking slightly embarrassed. "Yes, a…jolt of electricity, uh…"

"Then it's true."

Rarity gasped. "You mean…?"

"He's…?" Applejack uttered.

"Yes," Twilight nodded. "Our master has found his mate."

"I have," Discord said in astonishment as the words finally sank in. "I've found my mate. I've found my mate." He smiled with a sigh. "I've found my mate…"

"Oh, that's wonderful!" Rarity shrieked excitedly. "I can't wait to meet her, Master!"

"Yay, we're gonna get a new friend!" Pinkie cheered, hopping up and down.

Applejack was the only one who didn't seem the least bit enthusiastic about this. "I'm happy for ya, Master, but…you're gonna be good to her, right? You're not gonna…take advantage…are ya?"

"He can't," Twilight reminded her. "Remember our mating laws."

"All the same, you'll be careful about this, won't you, Master?"

Discord frowned as he and the orange earth pony locked eyes. He understood more than anyone in the hallway why this was concerning her.

He bent to her level and whispered assuredly, "Don't worry, Applejack. What happened to you won't happen to her."

He could tell she was trying to stop her eyes from leaking blood. She wiped the tears away and nodded. Discord smiled and then straightened up, returning to his dreamy state.

"I've found my mate," he whispered repeatedly as he proceeded down the hall. "I've found my mate. I've found my mate."

"Hey!" Rainbow called impatiently. "What about dinner?!"

Every pony turned to Spike, Applejack and Twilight looking grim. He glanced around at them and sighed as he rolled up his sleeve.

"Okay," he grumbled. "But can we do the left arm this time? My right's still numb."

"Come on, Sugar Cube," Applejack said in a hoarse voice as she gently guided him down the hallway. "Let's get this over with."

"Come on! There's no way a pint of his blood will be enough to feed all *five* of us!" Rainbow protested.

Rarity tapped her chin as she made a decision. "You can have my share." She used her magic to get her white headscarf off the coatrack. "I'll find my own dinner."

They all looked at her in surprise. Rainbow scoffed.

" *You* ?! Go *hunting* ?!"

Rarity narrowed her eyes and placed her hoof on her hip. "And why *not* ?!"

Before Rainbow could answer, Twilight intervened. "The Master doesn't *want* us to hunt! He doesn't want us to be responsible for…"

"Do you want Spike to end up like *you* ?!"

Rarity knew she had crossed a line when Twilight jumped back in appalment, but it had to be said. The lavender unicorn turned to Spike and Applejack, who was shaking her head towards the dragon. Twilight sighed and nodded in relent.

"Hey, if *she's* hunting," Rainbow said, " *I'm* hunting too!"

"Ooh, ooh!" Pinkie cried, raising her hoof. "Can I come too?!"

"Just don't feed on any ponies," Applejack said, her eyes particularly focused on Rarity.

The white unicorn stammered under her gaze, "O-Of course not!"

"Okay, let's go then!" Rainbow said as she pushed the double doors open. "I'm starving!"

"We'll save some for you!" Pinkie yelled over her shoulder.

As they stepped out, Rarity could feel Applejack's disapproving glare.

"So, what do you think?" Rainbow asked as she shut the doors behind them. "North? South? East? West?"

"What about north by southeast?" Pinkie giggled.

The pegasus rolled her eyes. "What do *you* think, Rarity?" She glanced around. "Rarity?"

But the unicorn had disappeared.

"Eh," Pinkie shrugged. "She probably wants to go it alone."

Rainbow scoffed again. "Or she's afraid she'll embarrass herself. Seriously though. *Rarity* ? *Hunting* ?! That I'd *love* to see!"

The streets of Zebiu were quiet that evening, now that every pony had gone to bed and the street performers and merchants had packed up for the night. However, there were always a few stragglers. An earth stallion was coming home late from a delivery, and the silence of the night was most disconcerting.

At one point, he thought he heard movement behind him and he turned around only to find nothing. He sighed in relief, but was met with a surprise when he faced ahead again.

A white unicorn mare was leaning out of an alleyway, sticking out her back leg, batting her long eyelashes.

"Looking for a good time?" she asked in a melodic tone, lifting her skirt some more.

The stallion looked with wide eyes from her bare leg to her face. She was removing her headscarf to reveal her elegantly curled purple mane.

"Well," he said, following her into the alleyway. "Don't mind if I do!"

The mare giggled playfully as she pressed the stallion against the wall.

"Wait," he said hesitantly. "How much is this gonna cost?"

"Oh, don't worry about that," she said with a seductive smile. "It's nothing you can't afford."

The stallion sighed as she slowly moved her hooves up his chest. "You like it when I do this?"

"Uh-huh," he nodded in satisfaction.

"How about this?" she asked as she caressed his neck.

"Oh, yes…"

"Even," she narrowed her eyes, " *this* ?"

Her hooves tightened around his throat. The stallion struggled as he tried to breathe.

"So *that's* the way you see mares, eh?" the mare growled angrily as her eyes changed from blue to red. "Just because we bat our eyes and say we like you, you think you can do anything you like with us, *huh* ?!"

He writhed in her grasp, staring at her face in horror as it began to change. She wasn't so pretty anymore. Her ears were now furrier and pointier, her eyebrows had become thicker and when she opened her mouth in a hiss, her fangs glinted in the moonlight.

"You think we're mere toys that can be *played with* ?! And when you break us, you think you can just toss us aside?!"

She kneed him in the groin. He would've howled in pain if he wasn't choking to death.

"Tell me then, domnule," she snarled. "Do you like it when I do… *this* ?!"

She released his throat to make room for her mouth. The stallion screamed as she stabbed her teeth into him. He wriggled in her hold, trying to break free. Eventually, he stopped struggling and went stiff and silent. His eyes were open in horror, but they would never see the light of day again.

Rarity tore away and let the scum drop to the ground. She glared down at him as she licked the blood off her lips.

"How do you like me *now* ?"

Wow. Don't hate me for making Rarity so dark, but believe me, there's a legitimate reason as to why she's doing this.

Okay, so maybe I was inspired a bit by "The Opera Phantom Discord," mostly with the gothic setting and Discord's relationship with the Mane 5. Then again, that was "Beauty and the Beast"-ish too.

"Domnule" is the Romanian term for "sir."

Nightmares

I was going to make this longer, but then figured what I had in mind would do better as its own chapter.

Fluttershy didn't hear a word of her aunt's scolding the rest of the way home. She didn't even argue when she was sent straight to bed. She was too much in a daze to stay awake. It turned out going to bed didn't help either. As soon as her candle was out, her imagination began to run wild.

The slightest creak or the softest wind would startle her. She tried closing her eyes but the image of the vampire would come to mind. She glanced out the window nervously, thinking he was going to crash through at any moment. Eventually, she got up to close the lace curtains, but that only made things worse, the window being her only source of light in the room. She at last decided on leaving the far curtain open so there would be enough light yet she wouldn't have to look outside.

It was a challenge tiptoeing back into bed, as she had the feeling the vampire would reach out from the shadows and grab her. She quickly jumped in the bed and threw the covers over her head, as if they could protect her from the monsters in the darkness.

She couldn't stop thinking about that creature: the blood-red pupils of his eyes, his menacing fangs, his deep, chilling voice; how close his face was to hers when he was about to bite her neck. She should've been relieved for being spared, but couldn't help but think the vampire was just biding his time and would soon return. She had believed him when he had said he would find her. Would he, regardless of whether she kept their meeting secret or not?

She stiffened as she felt something hop onto the mattress. She shivered as the thing crawled beside her body. Had the vampire returned? Was he going to suck her blood here in her own bed?!

Fluttershy screamed as a head poked under the covers. Then she sighed in deep relief once she realized who it was.

"Oh, Angel, you frightened me!" she exclaimed as she took the bunny in her hooves and cradled him to her chest.

She rocked back and forth as she listened to the faint noises of the night.

"Oh, Angel," she said, stroking the rabbit's head. "I'm so scared. I can't stop thinking about that…that awful creature! He *was* real, wasn't he? You saw him, didn't you?"

Angel nodded, though his answer didn't make her feel any better.

"So I *wasn't* imagining things. I really *did* see him." She closed her eyes and buried her face in his fur. "Oh, Angel, I'd never seen anything *like* him! The way he was just…stalking towards me and… towering over me and…when I saw his fangs, I thought I was done for!"

Angel let out a squeal as her grip tightened around him. She looked down at him apologetically.

"Sorry, Angel. I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm just…so frightened and…confused. I mean…he had me in his grasp, he could've…" She winced at the thought. "But…he *didn't* . But *why* , Angel? Why did he stop?"

The rabbit had no answer, so Fluttershy tried to think back to the earlier events of the evening. She remembered his sparkling white fangs and how she couldn't bear to look at them. She remembered the putrid smell of his breath as he drew his mouth closer to her throat.

But then? There had just been silence. When she had opened her eyes, his own had become…softer. It had seemed as if he couldn't take his eyes off her. She shivered at the memory of his claw caressing her cheek and stroking her mane. The way he had done it had been so…gentle. And then he had spoken again:

Beautiful .

That voice echoed in her head as she recalled his deep, soothing voice. It had sounded so sincere, like his focused gaze had appeared. Fluttershy was probably imagining things, but he had been leaning forward slightly, as if he were about to… *kiss* her.

Fluttershy shook her head. No. He had probably just been fooling around, taking his time with her to make killing her more pleasurable. Party Favor's voice had merely interrupted him.

He would come back for her. She was sure of it. When he did, she had to be ready.

It was three in the morning by the time Rarity had gotten home. She searched the entrance hall for the others, but all was quiet. She figured Rainbow and Pinkie had already brought their game home and they had all gone to sleep, as vampires often needed rest after feeding.

She was careful not to make a sound as she ascended the staircase and trotted to her room. She let out a weary moan as she opened and closed the door. When she turned around, she was met with an upside-down orange face. She shrieked in surprise.

"You're back awfully late," Applejack stated bluntly.

She was hanging from the ceiling by her back hooves, her forelegs crossed over her chest. Rarity exhaled in relief.

"Oh, you gave me a fright." She folded her hooves. "What are you doing in my room?"

Applejack swung her right leg off the ceiling to turn herself right-side-up and dropped to the floor with ease.

"Did ya find anything?" she asked casually.

"Oh," Rarity shrugged, "you know, slow night. All I could find was a squirrel. It seemed too small to bring back to share."

The earth pony raised an eyebrow. "How come ya didn't go with

Pinkie and Dash?"

"Rainbow was making fun of me," the unicorn said as she crossed the room to adjust the pillow in her white coffin. "I wanted to prove myself."

Applejack nodded slowly, still skeptical. "So tell me. How *was* the chipmunk?"

"Delicious," Rarity said flatly, fluffing her pillow. "Simply delicious. Chipmunk's aren't much, but they're tasty."

The earth pony placed a hoof on her hip as she stepped towards her. "I thought you said it was a *squirrel* ."

Rarity froze and turned to her nervously. "Did I? Oh," she laughed, "slip of the tongue!"

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "Whose blood is that, Rarity?"

The unicorn tried to look down at her mouth as she tried to wipe away the small drip of blood with her hoof.

"Oh, darn it! I thought I'd cleaned it all up!" She forced another laugh. "It's so hard to keep oneself tidy without a reflection!"

"You did it again, didn't you?"

Rarity paused and looked to the side. "W-Whatever do you mean, Applejack?"

"Admit it!" Applejack shouted, poking her hoof in the unicorn's chest. "You were feeding off stallions again, weren't you?! You were strutting down the streets, luring stallions in with yerr charms and sucking them dry!"

"So what if I was?!" Rarity snapped, slapping her hoof away. "They deserved it!"

The earth pony smacked herself in the head. "Rarity, we talked about this! You said you weren't gonna do this anymore! Suppose the master found out you were taking innocent lives…"

" *Innocent* ?!" The unicorn's eyes were red with fury. "They were *not* innocent! They're all the same, stallions! Vile, disgusting creatures, thinking they have the right to…to… *defile* mares and steal away their innocence!"

"That still doesn't give ya the right to…"

"I would think *you* of all ponies would understand! You know what *he* did to us!"

Applejack recoiled in shock and anger. "Don't you dare bring me into…"

"Why shouldn't I?! The very same thing happened to you! The only difference is that *you* resisted! Unlike me, you were fully aware when he…"

"Shut up!" Applejack shouted, her eyes turning red as she pressed the unicorn against the wall. "Don't you *ever* compare our situations *again* ! You think what happened to us is an excuse to take revenge on stallions who had no part in it?!"

Rarity huffed as she wrenched the earth pony's hooves off her shoulders. "You know very well who I'd *like* to crush with my bare hooves, but that's not possible at the moment, *is it* ?!"

Applejack felt ready to rip her head off, but took a deep breath and calmed herself down. "Look. What he did to us was…unforgiveable, but taking it out on other stallions doesn't make you any better than *him* ."

The unicorn turned her face away. "Leave. Please."

Applejack sighed and trotted to the door. When her hoof was on the knob, she looked back at Rarity over her shoulder.

"I've kept quiet about this," she whispered, "but if this happens again…"

Rarity ignored her as she crawled into her coffin, crossed her hooves over her chest and willed the lid to fall. Applejack shook her head as she opened the door. As she closed it, she looked at the

white casket through the crack.

"I know, Rarity," she said softly, not sure whether her friend could hear or not. "I wanna kill him too."

Yeah, I keep teasing you with their backstories! Because I'm evil! MWAHAHAHAHA!

Legends and Longings

It's been a tough week, with mid-terms and the impending hurricane (luckily, we're not getting the worst of it here). Also, there was a lot to put in this chapter.

Fluttershy's fatigue was highly noticeable when she came into the dining room for breakfast. Her aunt gaped at the purple bags under her eyes.

"Goodness, dear!" she exclaimed. "What *have* you done to your face?!"

"I didn't sleep well," Fluttershy murmured as she sat down.

The cook, Sugar Belle, had made tomato soup to start. Fluttershy sipped it quietly, though her mind wasn't on food. She'd been up half the night worrying about the vampire she had encountered. She had managed to get a few hours' sleep, only to be plagued with nightmares on said creature.

"The morning paper, doamnă," Double Diamond said as he set the newspaper before Starlight.

She levitated it to her eye-level to read. She rolled her eyes in boredom as she read the headline.

"Another nobody murdered," she groaned as she turned the page.

"Oh, yes," said Night Glider as she took away the empty soup bowls. "Every pony's been talking about it all morning. Apparently, this is the third stallion this month that has been found dead with two puncture wounds in his neck, completely drained of his blood!"

Fluttershy dropped her spoon in horror. "D-Drained of his…b-b-blood?"

"Really, Night Glider," Starlight huffed. "Is this really a topic to be discussed while *eating* ?"

"Sorry, doamnă," the maid said, bowing her head apologetically before flying into the kitchen.

Party Favor brought the second course: scrambled eggs with a side of leeks. Fluttershy took little interest in her breakfast. In fact, she had quite lost her appetite.

Had the vampire chosen to feed on some pony else after letting her go? Had the death of that stallion been *her* fault? Was *she* next?

Fluttershy had so many questions. If this vampire was coming back, how was she to defend herself? She was a meek little mare. What chance did she have against a ten-foot, bloodthirsty, shapeshifting vampire?

After breakfast, she approached Night Glider, since she seemed to know all the gossip.

"Vampires?" the maid said, raising an eyebrow. "Why do you want to know about *vampires* ?"

Fluttershy was about to answer but then remembered the vampire's warning if she told anyone.

"Oh, um…" she stammered, biting her lip. "Just…curious."

Night Glider shrugged and said, "Well, ponies in this country have been telling stories about vampires ever since Vladihoof the Impaler ruled. Maybe even before then, who knows? They only come out at night. You know, because they pretty much burn in the sunlight. Some say they have super strength and speed, or that they have awesome powers, like the ability to turn into a bat."

"Do they look…unusual in any way?"

"Don't know. Never seen a vampire myself. If I did, I'd be dead." She chuckled slightly. "I've heard lots of crazy theories. Some say they look like regular ponies, only more beautiful. That's how they're able to lure their victims in. Others say they're like a hybrid between a bat

and a pony. Some even say they have claws, though I don't see how that'll work with hooves."

"But do they," Fluttershy said nervously, "have horns and…paws and…lots of other animal body parts?"

Night Glider cocked her head. "Haven't heard *that* one before. But oh," she rubbed her chin with an interested smile, "that *would* be scary."

"Yes," Fluttershy said, shivering at the memory of the creature. "Anyway, are there any ways to protect oneself from vampires?"

"Oh, sure, assuming those things exist. Garlic, wooden stakes, luring one into the sunlight, forcing them to count seeds…" She laughed. "That's a good one."

The maid didn't have much else to tell her, so Fluttershy resorted to the mansion library. Unfortunately, because her aunt had picked out most of the books, there was nothing on vampires or urban legends of any kind. At lunch, she decided to ask her aunt permission to go to the town library.

"Whatever for?" Starlight questioned with a raised eyebrow.

Fluttershy had already prepared her answer. "Since Count Trenderhoof will be coming soon, I should like to know more about his family and Bullarest, because…showing interest in his background will arouse his interest in me?"

Her aunt smiled and nodded in approval. "Good idea, dear. But you'll need an escort into town. Party Favor, I believe it's your turn."

Half an hour later, Fluttershy and Party Favor were at the public library. The librarian, a pale yellow unicorn with tangled red and purple hair and spectacles, looked up from her book with a sour expression on her face.

"Can I help you?" she asked in an unpleasant tone.

"Excuse me, Domnişoară," Fluttershy said, looking quickly at the name plate, "Moondancer, but do you have any books on," she

glanced back at Party Favor before whispering, "vampires?"

Moondancer raised an eyebrow. She had not expected a young noblemare to be interested in so gruesome a subject. However, it was not her place to judge ponies' tastes. She pointed to her left.

"You'll find them in the Mythology section," she replied monotonously.

"Thank you," Fluttershy said graciously as she headed in the direction indicated.

Party Favor was confused when he followed his young mistress into the Mythology section.

"I thought you were reading up on Bullarest."

Fluttershy bit her lip nervously, knowing she couldn't keep this secret for long. "I…I lied."

"You WHAT?!" the unicorn shrieked.

"SHHH!" Moondancer hissed harshly from her desk.

Party Favor smiled apologetically and turned to whisper to the pegasus. "You *lied* to your aunt? How could you do such a thing? She won't be happy when she finds out you…"

"She *won't* find out," Fluttershy insisted as she pulled a book off the shelf. "She *mustn't* !"

"But why would you…?"

She sighed and laid her hoof on his shoulder. "If I could explain it to you, I would, but for now, you'll just have to trust me and not breathe a word of what I'm doing to my aunt. Please, Party Favor?"

Her eyes were so big and pleading that it was impossible to resist. Party Favor hung his head with a sigh.

"Okay. But if we get in trouble for this…"

"Don't worry," Fluttershy assured him. "I'll tell my aunt it was my fault and you were just taking orders from me."

After finding a reasonable amount of books, Fluttershy set to work at a desk while Party Favor kept a lookout for any pony they knew. One way or another, Fluttershy was going to find out everything she could about that vampire.

Vampires never dreamed, so Discord was surprised to find himself in a sunny, grassy meadow. It had to be a dream, or else he'd be a pile of ash by now. He glanced around at the field, his eyes falling upon a group of animals gathered around a mare that had her back to him. She was cuddling the tiny squirrels, rabbits, chipmunks and mice, singing a sweet little tune in a melodic voice.

It was enough to enchant even the vilest of creatures, which was why Discord could not stop himself from walking towards her. The animals scattered when they saw him approach, but not the mare.

She turned her head to face him, her gorgeous teal eyes locking with his. He felt a beating inside his chest, something he would never feel when awake. A smile appeared on her delicate yellow face and she flew up to his eye-level, her long pink mane flowing gently in the breeze.

All the breath was taken from him as a soft yellow hoof caressed his cheek. He sighed in satisfaction as he took the hoof in his claw and leaned into her touch. He found himself staring into her eyes again.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, reaching up to brush her mane behind her ear.

The mare giggled, lifting her other hoof to his face. "I'm also yours, as you are mine. For all eternity."

Her eyes closed as she brought his face closer to her lips.

Discord awoke with a start and would've fallen out of his casket had it not been sealed. He rubbed his eyes as he reflected on his very first dream.

His old master had said meeting his mate would cause such things. Every time he closed his eyes, he would see the young pegasus mare. He had only known her for a minute and yet she had already bewitched him.

It's like a plague , the words of his old master echoed in his head. *A plague you never want to be cured of. You'll start dreaming for the first time in your vampire life, and you'll dream of only her. You'll never want for another, for she is destined to be your one true love.*

Discord looked over at the empty space beside him. It wasn't so hard to picture the perfect female now that he had seen her. He imagined her lying next to him, her hooves stroking his face as she had done in his dream. He imagined taking her in his arms and feeling her warmth against his chest. He imagined running his fingers through her mane, taking in its silky texture. He imagined her eyes making contact with his, completely devoid of fear. She would smile at him, nuzzle him, show him how much she…

He shook his head and snapped out of his daydream. What was he doing? He didn't know anything about this mare and yet he was already fantasizing the two of them in his coffin! He didn't even know her name, let alone her personality. Would she even approach a monster like him? After all, their first meeting hadn't been the most pleasant. Would such a beautiful creature like her dare to one day… *love* him?

That was indeed a problem. Vampires immediately knew their soulmates, but mortals didn't have the same instinct. He remembered how his master had struggled to woo his mate before she had allowed him to change her.

You must be patient , his master had told him. *It will take a while, but she will love you in time. It is destiny* .

It was easy for him to say. His master, though frightening, had looked like a normal vampire: handsome, pony-shaped. Discord didn't have that advantage.

It was just his luck that his future mate was, in his opinion, the most beautiful mare in the world. What chance did he have with her?

Then he thought of those who weren't afraid of his looks. All his servants had been alarmed by his appearance at first (except for Pinkie, but she'd always been an odd one), but had quickly grown accustomed to him. But their devotion was entirely different. They weren't bound to him by fate. He wasn't dreaming about kissing *them* .

There was one thing he knew for sure. He had to see this mare again. He needed to know who she was, where she lived, what she liked, everything he possibly could about her.

He opened his coffin and checked the clock. It was evening, but that didn't mean the sun had set yet. He pressed his back against the wall and made a window appear beside him. When no sunlight came through, he transformed into a bat and flew off into the night.

"Excuse me, domnişoară, but we're closing soon."

Fluttershy looked up from her book to see the stern librarian staring down at her.

"Right," she said softly as she closed the book and stood up. "Sorry. Come on, Party Favor."

The books she had gone through had offered many stories on vampires, but they were all contradictory. Apparently, few saw vampires and lived to tell the tale, so there was nothing concrete.

She reviewed all she had read in her head: vampires had no reflection, they couldn't go out in the sunlight, they could be repelled with garlic, they could be killed with a wooden stake to the heart. Some books said they could transform into bats, others suggested wolves, or they didn't transform at all but were gifted with heightened senses, incredible strength and speed. Some said they *could* go out in the sun, but their skin would sparkle. They were hideous monsters, they were beautiful and seductive. They had the compulsion to count seeds or untangle things. Surprisingly, there was no mention of them having body parts of various animals. Most of the books claimed that they looked like ponies, which was why

they were difficult to catch.

There was one thing all the books agreed on: they survived on the blood of living creatures.

As she and Party Favor trotted through the dark streets of Zebiu, Fluttershy wondered how she was going to protect herself. She could ask Sugar Belle if she had any garlic, but she wasn't sure if that could truly repel vampires or if it was just a thing of legend.

It was early evening and the merchants were finishing their day by luring in the potential customers walking home from work. Fluttershy and Party Favor passed by a Romane caravan where a blue unicorn mare was performing magic while two unicorn colts, one short and chubby, one tall and skinny; were waving colorful ribbons upstage. Out of curiosity, Fluttershy stopped to watch as the Romane mare conjured a shower of rose petals, making the audience applaud.

"Yes, indeed!" she shouted to the crowd. "The Great and Powerful Trixie has been to all parts of the globe, learning from the most magical of wizards, facing the most dangerous of mystical beasts…"

Fluttershy's eyes widened at this statement. She started pushing to the front of the crowd before Party Favor could stop her.

"Excuse me," she whispered apologetically. "Excuse me, Domnişoară Trixie?"

The unicorn mare looked down at her with a raised eyebrow. "Who dares interrupt the Great and Powerful Trixie?!"

"I'm so sorry but…is it true that you've seen many dangerous creatures in your travels?"

Trixie smiled and flipped her platinum mane. "It *is* true. Trixie has no fear!"

"Well, have you ever seen a tall, dragon-like creature with a deer antler, lion paw, eagle claw, a long skinny body, and drinks blood like a vamp—"

She was cut off when she heard a thump onstage. The Romane

unicorns were standing stiff, staring at her in horror. The young colts in the back had dropped their ribbons.

"So you *have* seen…?"

"Silence!" Trixie shouted.

She touched something around her neck and brought it forward. It was a gold pendant shaped like the sun.

"Protect me, Celestia! Protect me!"

"Please!" Fluttershy begged, placing her hooves on the edge of the stage. "I must know what…"

"Show is over, folks! Go home!"

Fluttershy squealed as the stage folded into the caravan. It was encased in a pink aura and bolted down the street. The crowd groaned in disappointment as it dispersed, many eyes looking at Fluttershy with disapproval.

"What's gotten into you, domnişoară?" Party Favor demanded. "And what sort of creature were you talking about?"

"A draconequus."

The two ponies looked down at a small, orange, Romane pegasus filly with purple eyes. She wore a white dress with red trimming and a red kerchief which covered most of her short, purple mane, but these clothes were tattered and covered in mud, as if she hadn't worn anything else for days.

"I heard what you said, domnişoară," she said, "and I know what you're talking about."

"Do you?" Fluttershy asked hopefully. "Do you really?"

The filly nodded. "I can tell you more, but since I haven't eaten in days, it's so hard to think and…"

She casually held out her hoof. Fluttershy reached into her satchel

for some bits.

"Domnişoară!" Party Favor protested, stopping her hoof. "You can't give money to this gypsy!"

"Romane," the filly grumbled.

"What will your aunt say?!"

Fluttershy narrowed her eyes in determination as she wrenched her hoof out of her bag. "She's only a filly."

She handed the foal five bits. The young Romane smiled and tucked the money away in the pocket of her apron.

"Name's Scootaloo, by the way," she said, reaching out her hoof. "Thank you for your kindness."

"I'm Fluttershy," the pegasus beamed as she shook her hoof. "Now, you say you saw this…what did you call it?"

"Draconequus. Yes. It's one of the rarest, most dangerous creatures in all of Tramplevania. We Romanes dare not speak of it, for fear it will curse us." She said all this without flinching. "But, seeing as my life couldn't get any worse than this, I can say whatever I like."

"What *is* a draconequus?"

"As you said, it's made up of lots of animal parts. It's a type of vampire, except draconequui are born, not made. Some say they're worse than regular vampires, that they have crazy powers, like the ability to summon objects at will or turn a whole castle upside-down!"

Fluttershy gulped. "Have…have you ever… *seen* one?"

Scootaloo glanced around, gestured for her to come closer and whispered, "You didn't hear this from me, but I'm pretty sure one lives in the forest over yonder. I was sleeping a few feet away from the edge the other night and I saw a tall, thin shadow. It was only for a second, but I could've sworn it had funny-looking horns. I also see giant bats flying around the night sky, sometimes more than one, so

I don't think he's alone in there."

Fluttershy nodded slowly, her face growing pale as she listened. "And…have they caught you?"

The filly huffed. "No. And even if they did, I'm safe."

She reached into the collar of her dress and pulled out a beaded necklace. Upon closer inspection, Fluttershy realized they were tiny pieces of garlic.

"Zecora was nice enough to give this to me when I told her what I saw," Scootaloo said proudly.

"Zecora?" Fluttershy questioned.

"She's the local witch. She has all sorts of charms and stuff."

"Where can I find her?"

"Her house is just down there," Scootaloo said, pointing down the street. "It's the old shabby one that looks abandoned."

"Thank you."

Fluttershy handed the filly another bit before departing down the road. Party Favor trotted up to her in haste.

"Domnişoară, what's this all about?!" he demanded, his eyes wide in panic. "First you're reading old ponies' tales, then you're going on about…vampires! With a gypsy, no less! Now you're going to see a *witch* ?! Do you know what your aunt would say if she…?"

"Please, Party Favor," Fluttershy whispered, halting him with her hoof. "I *need* to know these things for reasons I can't tell you, but you must trust me when I say my reasons are *good* !"

The unicorn stared at her and sighed as he followed her to the witch's house. Fluttershy knocked on the door and listened.

"Come in, my dear. I am in here."

Party Favor shivered as they opened the door and entered the oddly-decorated room. He looked up nervously at the clay masks on the walls.

"Are you Zecora?" Fluttershy asked the zebra at the table. "The witch?"

Zecora nodded. "Yes, fair one, I am she." She looked at Party Favor. "Sit down. You need not fear me."

The stallion shook his head. "No thanks," he gulped. "I'm good."

Fluttershy took a seat and said to the zebra, "I hear you have charms that can ward off vampires."

She could've sworn she saw a flash of fear in Zecora's eyes before she got up from the table and went to her cabinet.

"Vampires, you say?" she said as she rummaged through the shelves. "Did one come your way?"

Fluttershy hesitated to answer. "Um, uh…I've just heard things and…can't be too careful, right?"

Zecora returned with a necklace similar to the one she'd seen on Scootaloo and a crystal ball. The latter she placed on the table.

"Wear this around your neck, all day, all night," she said, holding out the necklace to Fluttershy, "and you'll be immune to the vampire bite."

"How much?" the pegasus asked, digging into her bag.

Zecora held up a hoof. "For payment, I only ask but this: the *true* reason you want this necklace."

The zebra was staring at her hard, as if she knew there was an ulterior motive behind Fluttershy's request. The pegasus shifted in her seat.

"I…can't say."

Zecora shrugged and moved the necklace away.

"Truly, I can't!" Fluttershy insisted. "He'll kill me if I…"

She covered her mouth. Zecora's eyes were wide with alarm. She turned to Party Favor and tilted her head to the door.

"Oh, but her aunt asked me to…"

"Leave us," Fluttershy softly commanded.

He was hesitant, but also relieved to be out of the creepy house. Once they were alone, Zecora looked at Fluttershy with soft, kind eyes.

" *I* hold the secret of these creatures too. Confide in me, I'll make sure they don't harm you."

The pegasus' eyes widened. "You…you know of the vampires in the woods?"

"I can say no more than what I have said. Now tell me how *you* know of the undead."

Fluttershy took a deep breath and spilled the whole story. She felt so relieved to get it out after holding it in all day. Zecora listened intently and nodded when appropriate.

"A gypsy filly said that what I saw was a draconequus. Do…that is… have *you* seen it too?"

Zecora studied her face carefully to be sure she was telling the truth and that she wasn't one of those ponies who liked to play jokes on the witch. But anyone could plainly see the innocence in the young mare, even if they looked past the beauty.

When she was certain her customer was being truthful, she asked, "Would you like your fortune told, if I may be so bold?"

"Oh," Fluttershy said, finally understanding why she had brought out the crystal ball. "Sure, uh…what do you want for…?"

"This shall be for free. I only want to see."

Zecora closed her eyes as she swirled her hooves around the crystal ball, humming a low tune. Fluttershy jumped as the ball seemed to come alive as a green swirling mist materialized within it. Zecora opened her eyes and squinted at the now glowing ball.

"I see," she murmured, "I see…"

The mist turned pink and took the form of a butterfly.

"I see a kind heart, the purest of pure." She smiled at Fluttershy. "I don't need a crystal ball to be sure."

The pegasus blushed slightly. "What else do you see?"

The misty butterfly slowly dispersed and reformed into a heart.

"You are to be married off soon," Zecora continued, "to a rich, handsome stranger of a groom."

Fluttershy nodded sadly.

"But your passionate heart won't accept such a fate. You desire true love," she smirked, "and you won't have to wait."

The pegasus was about to ask about this when there was a loud screech and the smoke turned bright red. The two of them jumped back in their seats, Zecora gripping her armrests. She shut her eyes as she started breathing heavily. Fluttershy leaned forward cautiously.

"Are you al…?"

She squealed when Zecora's eyes opened. They were glowing white, as was the crystal ball.

"He waits for you…"

Fluttershy quivered at the change in her voice. It was lower and sounded like something from a nightmare.

"He waits for you…" the zebra said again, "the Count…he yearns for your blood…for your innocence…danger…death…vengeance…truth…rebirth…blood…death…death…death…"

"STOP IT!" Fluttershy shouted.

Zecora snapped out of her trance. Her eyes had returned to normal and the ball was reduced to its original crystal-clear state.

"Sorry," she coughed, sitting upright. "Did not mean to alarm." She held out the garlic necklace. "Go now and take your charm."

"But what was that all a…?"

"Go!" Zecora insisted. "I can do no more for you here. Go now, and be careful, my dear."

Despite the shock she had just received, Fluttershy took the necklace, thanked the zebra and joined Party Favor outside.

"Are you alright?" he pleaded. "I thought I heard screaming! I was just about to barge in there!"

"I'm fine," Fluttershy said as she lifted the necklace over her head. "I…saw a mouse."

"Can we go back to the manor now?" Party Favor asked, glancing nervously up and down the empty candlelit street. "It's getting late and your aunt will be expecting us for dinner…"

"Yes, we can go back now."

He sighed in relief, for this was the best idea she'd had all day.

High above Zebiu, Discord was flying in his bat form, searching the streets and houses for signs of his mare. He was sure she lived here, for it was the nearest town. It was easier to peer into houses as a bat, for they were so common around here that no pony paid any heed.

He was worrying he would never find her, until he heard voices near Zecora's home. Then he saw her and he nearly lost his balance. He perched on a roof to get a better look at her. In the light of the streetlamps, she looked even more beautiful than he remembered.

Then he noticed the unicorn stallion walking beside her and Discord felt a strong pang of jealousy.

Calm down, Discord , he told himself, taking a deep breath. *It may not be what you think. He could be her brother, or friend, or servant. After all, no mare in their right mind would be out alone at this hour, especially after meeting* you *the previous night.*

As the mare and her companion continued on their way, Discord followed them and would stop occasionally to watch, debating on whether or not he should approach. He couldn't reveal himself with the stallion there. He could always take his pony form, but he didn't want to win her love under false pretenses. If she were ever to love him, he wanted it to be for *him* , not how he looked.

He was so deep in thought that he didn't even realize that he was changing back, as his hour was up.

As Fluttershy and Party Favor turned a corner, they came across four stallions wrapped in shabby cloaks huddled against a wall. One stallion, and earth pony with dark stubble around his mouth, looked up at the mare and pleaded in a thick accent:

"Please, domnişoară. We are but poor, hungry stallions. Could you spare a few bits?"

He held out his hoof. Party Favor backed away in hesitance.

"Oh, sure," Fluttershy said, reaching into her satchel. "I can give you a few…"

"Or perhaps," the beggar said, standing up, "you could give us," he took a knife out of his cloak, " *all* your bits."

Fluttershy and Party Favor shrieked as the other three beggars, who were nearly twice their size, stood up and closed in on them. Before they knew it, they were backed into an alleyway.

Discord was snapped out of his thoughts when he heard his mate scream. He sat up and gasped when he saw the four thieves surrounding her and her companion. Discord's eyes narrowed, his pupils shrinking, steam coming out of his nostrils, hatred and anger bubbling within him.

"Uh…" Party Favor said with a nervous smile. "Can't we work something out? We don't have much!"

"Please!" Fluttershy squealed, grabbing hold of her servant's foreleg. "We'll give you anything!"

"Then hand over the bag, domnişoară," the leader of the thieves smirked, holding out his hoof, "and we'll be on our way."

Fluttershy was about to do just that when out of nowhere, something came between her and the thieves. All she could see was a tall back covered by a black cape, held up by what looked like an eagle claw and a lion paw.

Her blood grew cold as realization dawned on her.

Discord hissed in the thieves' faces, making them jump back and scream. They tried to run, but with a swipe of his claw, Discord willed his cape to fly off his body, wrap up the thieves and throw them against the wall. Party Favor collapsed to the ground in a faint. Fluttershy was frozen in terror.

The thugs quivered in their black blanket as Discord slithered over to them.

"How dare you?" he demanded coldly. "How *dare* you?!" He lunged at them, placing his paw and claw on either side of their heads. "What gives you the right to *threaten* a poor, defenseless mare?! A *lady* !"

"We are sorry!" the leader insisted, shutting his eyes tight. "We…we just want food and there was no other way…"

"Well," Discord snorted, stepping back. "You won't have to worry about hunger anymore."

He opened his mouth and the thieves screamed at the sight of his fangs.

"Wait!"

Discord's teeth were just inches from the leader's neck when Fluttershy's voice stopped him.

"Don't hurt them!"

He moved away from the thieves and looked at her in confusion. She was still shivering in fright, but her eyes were bold and pleading. Such a gaze made him feel like he was melting in the sun.

"Don't hurt them?" he repeated. " *Don't* hurt them?! They tried to harm *you* ! They tried to rob you of your money!"

Fluttershy gulped as she tried to stay brave. "Yes, but…they…they couldn't help it and…what they did was bad but…they…they don't deserve to… *die* ." Tears came to her eyes as she begged him again, "Please?"

He wanted to argue. He wanted to defy her wish, for he truly wanted these thugs to pay for trying to hurt his mare. But when he opened his mouth to protest, he found that he couldn't. No. He couldn't argue with those eyes. Those watery, piteous, innocent eyes.

These vermin had tried to rob her, and yet she wanted them spared. He found her compassion remarkable. Most ponies would choose vengeance over forgiveness, even his servants. It made him admire her even more.

But he couldn't just let these thugs escape so they could tell every pony all they had seen, so he turned back to them with spiraling eyes. He waited until they had all locked gaze with him and their eyes showed that they were under his power. Fluttershy watched in bewilderment.

"Now, listen carefully," Discord said in a low voice. "When I release you, you are going to go as far away from here as possible. Then you will forget this encounter and never steal from any pony ever again. Understood?"

The thieves nodded in unison.

"Good."

He grabbed the end of his cape and tugged on it, making the thugs spin out of control. Once they had gotten over their dizziness, they raced out of the alley as Discord proudly replaced his cape. His gaze returned to Fluttershy and the mare whimpered as he stalked towards her.

What was he going to do? Had he scared the thieves away just so he could have her for himself? Why else would he save her? Was he going to suck her blood right there in the alleyway, or was he going to whisk her away to someplace more isolated? Was he going to suck her dry or simply bite her?

"Are you alright?"

She was caught off guard by the softness in his voice. He seemed to be looking at her in concern, his claw reaching out but hesitating to touch her.

"Did they hurt you?"

Fluttershy blinked in surprise. He was awaiting her answer, yet she couldn't find her voice. She responded by shaking her head slowly. Discord sighed in relief.

"Thank darkness!" He scowled and clenched his fists. "If they had hurt you, I wouldn't have let them go!"

She became even more confused by this statement. He was a lot different from the creature she had met last night. Instead of being menacing, he was acting almost… *protective* .

"What is your name?"

She jumped when she realized his face was just inches from hers. His pupils were wide with interest, and he was smiling slightly.

"Please," he demanded softly. "Tell me your name."

Her mind was in such a muddle she couldn't process a word he was saying. It took all her courage to get some words out.

"Who…w-why…y-you…saved me?"

Discord opened his mouth but quickly stopped himself. What should he say? What *could* he say? That she was his soulmate? That the two of them were destined to be together? That it was his sworn duty to protect her at all costs?

No, she wouldn't understand. If he was ever going to get her to agree to be his mate, he mustn't overwhelm her with talk of fate.

"I, um," he said, straightening up and clearing his throat. "Apologies, domnişoară. You must have so many questions right now. Well, they will all be answered in due time, but for now, I can only assure you that you need not fear me. I mean you no harm whatsoever."

Fluttershy looked as if she didn't believe him. Then he finally noticed the garlic necklace she had on and took a step back.

"Besides," he cringed, "I couldn't harm you even if I wanted to."

She followed his gaze and sighed in relief when she was reminded of the charm around her neck.

"You're lucky I was out here," Discord said. "A pretty young mare such as yourself shouldn't be wandering about at night, even with an escort." He looked down at Party Favor with slight amusement. "Yours didn't seem to be of much help anyway."

Fluttershy then remembered Party Favor and knelt down to his unconscious form. "Oh, poor thing. He's received quite a shock."

Discord felt a mix of admiration and anger at how tender she was being towards the stallion. "Your, um…gentlecolt friend, perhaps?"

"Oh," Fluttershy said, blushing at the thought. "No, no. He's just my servant, or rather my aunt's servant."

Discord's face lit up with a bright smile. "Oh! Well, in that case, since your servant is…incapacitated, may I escort you home,

domnişoară? I can carry your servant, if you'd like."

He stepped toward Party Favor. Fluttershy threw herself over the unicorn and looked up at him in horror.

"Don't worry," Discord said, holding up his paw and claw defensively. "I won't hurt him."

She was still skeptical and tried to come up with an excuse. "I…I appreciate the offer but…it…it wouldn't be proper and…what if some pony else sees you?"

Discord smirked and shrank down into his gray unicorn form. He used his new horn to levitate Party Favor onto his back, ignoring Fluttershy's protests.

"Really, domnule, I can manage…"

"Which are you more afraid of, domnişoară?" Discord asked with a raised eyebrow. "A vampire who cannot touch you as long as you wear that necklace, or dangerous, night-lurking thugs who aren't repelled by such charms?"

She could not find an argument. So, keeping a close eye on her unconscious servant, she followed the disguised vampire out of the alley and into the street.

There was a long, awkward silence as Discord kept glancing at Fluttershy, while she kept glancing between him and Party Favor. Eventually, she got up the courage to speak.

"W-Why…why did you let me go?"

He turned and locked eyes with her, getting lost for a moment in their blue-green depths. Again, he hesitated on how much he should tell her. Would she even believe him?

He decided on this safe yet truthful answer: "You are very beautiful."

He couldn't help but smile as he watched the color in her cheeks change. She turned from him, her mane falling over her eye.

"I'm serious," he insisted. "I may be a vampire, but destroying a gorgeous creature like you would be…such a waste."

Fluttershy cleared her throat and stepped to the side, putting some distance between herself and Discord.

"So, uh…you *are* a draconequus? A vampire who's not made but… born?"

He frowned. "Yes. What… *else* have you heard about me?"

She bit her lip. "I, uh…I'd rather not say." She turned to him as something else occurred to her. "What you did to those thieves… why…why didn't you do that to me? You spared me but you didn't… make me forget."

She was sharper than he had taken her to be. It was almost as if she suspected there was something he wasn't telling her and was backing him into a corner, forcing him to spill it.

"I…" he gulped. "I wanted you to…remember me."

She cocked her head curiously. "Why?"

"Which way is your house?"

They had gotten to a fork in the road. Fluttershy pointed to the left and they continued on their way.

"Why would you want me to remember you?" she asked again. "I mean you told me not to tell any pony, and I *haven't* , but…you couldn't have known for sure I wouldn't."

"Where do you live exactly?" Discord quickly inquired.

"Oh. I live in the town square."

"Good. We're almost there."

Fluttershy was only now realizing the danger in letting him know where she lived. Then again, they'd been walking for a while and he hadn't attacked her yet, but that could've just been because of the

garlic. His behavior was quite curious, though. Every time she asked him why he had spared her last night or why he had saved her just now, he would hesitate and appear uncomfortable. With every minute, he was becoming less like a menacing vampire and more like a shy school colt.

"Here we are," Fluttershy said when they arrived in the town square.

Discord raised an eyebrow as she trotted toward a grand, purple mansion. " *This* is your home?"

"I live with my aunt, the Lady Starlight Glimmer."

He stared at her with wide eyes. "The Lady Starlight Glimmer is your *aunt* ? Then that makes you…the Lady Fluttershy."

She stopped in her tracks. "How do you know who I am?"

"Every pony knows who you are," he replied hastily. "You're nobility."

She nodded. "Yes, I suppose you're right. I just didn't expect you to…never mind."

Discord carefully levitated Party Favor off his back and onto the mansion's doorstep.

"Are you going to…make him forget too?" Fluttershy questioned.

"I don't think we have to worry," Discord said with a shrug. "From the shock he received, he'll probably pass me off as a hallucination."

They were silent for a long while.

"Um…" Fluttershy stammered, looking down at her hooves. "Thank you for, um…you know."

"My pleasure," Discord whispered, not taking his eyes off her.

She blushed slightly. "You…you still haven't told me who…"

"Fluttershy?!"

She turned at her aunt's voice. She could hear her hoofsteps inside, storming to the door. Fluttershy looked back at Discord, but he had vanished, and Party Favor was starting to come to.

"Fluttershy!" Starlight gasped as she opened the door. "Where have you been?! And…what's happened to Party Favor?!"

The stallion groaned as he sat up and rubbed his temple. "Ugh, my head…"

Starlight looked at Fluttershy with wide eyes. "What happened?!"

"Uh…" Fluttershy uttered, glancing around. "We, uh…we ran into some thieves and…"

"Thieves?! Fluttershy, I *warned* you not to stay out too late! How much did they steal?!"

"Nothing. I mean…Party Favor managed to fight them off but…he got knocked unconscious. I…I couldn't wake him so…I dragged him back."

Her aunt blinked down at the stallion. " *You* fought off a bunch of thugs?"

Party Favor shrugged. "I guess?"

Discord was hidden on a rooftop, in his true form, watching the scene in amusement. He smiled in awe at Fluttershy's cleverness.

"Fluttershy," he whispered to himself, sighing dreamily.

It was a beautiful name. It sounded like the gentle flap of a butterfly's wing. He couldn't imagine a name that would suit the pretty, delicate mare any better.

But he wouldn't reveal his own name to her. No, not yet. Now that he knew the mare's identity, he had devised the perfect plan to properly get better acquainted with her and to eventually win her favor.

"I'll see you soon, my love," he whispered before changing into a bat

and disappearing into the night.

Don't hate me for that *Twilight* reference. That was just for laughs.

The part where Discord is thinking about Fluttershy in his coffin was inspired by an anonymous poem "There Is a Lady Sweet and Kind."

In case you haven't guessed, the thugs were Caballeron and his henchponies.

Invitation

The last couple of weeks have been hectic, with school and many setbacks in production for "Daughter of Discord." I've had to break my routine.

Discord's idea of a wake-up call was one no one in the castle appreciated.

"EMERGENCY MEETING!" he hollered while ringing a giant bell through the hallways. "UP AND AT 'EM! EMERGENCY MEETING!"

He opened Rainbow Dash's door and shouted, "WAKE UP, DASHIE!"

The pegasus had been hanging upside-down from the ceiling with her wings wrapped around her. Upon hearing the ringing bell from Tartarus, she awoke with a shriek and dropped to the floor.

"Who's a…what's a…?" she asked rapidly, looking in all directions.

"Drawing room, NOW!" Discord commanded before continuing down the hall.

Twilight and Rarity were the first to come out of their rooms, glaring at their master in annoyance.

"A simple nudge on the shoulder would've sufficed!" the latter huffed.

"COME ON, SPIKE!" Discord shouted into the dragon's room. "NO TIME TO DILLY-DALLY!"

Spike emerged from his room in a nightgown and cap, rubbing his eyes and holding a doll resembling Rarity.

"Not all of us are nocturnal, you know?" he grumbled.

Rarity was looking down at the doll with wide eyes. When Spike noticed this, he quickly hid it behind his back.

"Spike, we talked about this…" the white unicorn said gently.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Spike said quickly as he tossed the doll back into his room.

Meanwhile, Discord was trying to wake the rest of his servants.

"PINKIE, GET UP!" he bellowed, lifting the lid of the pink coffin.

"Five more minutes, Mommy?" Pinkie snorted.

He rolled his eyes and threw the sleeping pony over his shoulder before proceeding to Applejack's room.

"Come on, AJ, you're always the first one up!" he grunted as he opened the orange coffin. "You said back at the farm you were used to waking up ear—"

He paused when he discovered Applejack holding her pillow close to her chest and snuggling her face into it. She inhaled its scent deeply and sighed dreamily.

"Apples…"

"Um…" Discord uttered, poking her with his claw. "AJ?"

Applejack's eyes opened and widened. She looked between Discord and the pillow she was embracing.

"Uh…can we keep this as our little secret?"

Discord shook out of his shock. "Right. Anyway, emergency meeting in the drawing room!" He shook the pony on his shoulder as he exited the room. "And Pinkie, wake up! You're drooling all over my cape!"

Soon they were all assembled in the drawing room, sleepy and grumpy.

"What's going on?" Rainbow asked with a yawn. "It's eight o'clock at night."

"Has some pony else discovered us?" Twilight inquired.

"Are we going to have a new arrival?!" Pinkie asked excitedly, jumping up and down. "I sure hope so, because I was interrupted from a beautiful dream!"

"Pinkie, vampires don't *have* dreams, until they meet their soulmates, of course."

"Well, duh! I know that! But I was enjoying the endless pool of darkness." She sighed. "I like to imagine it as liquidated black licorice!"

"The matter of which I called you here is of greater importance," Discord said.

Everyone leaned forward intently. Their master surprised them by squealing like a schoolfilly.

"I know who my mate is!"

They all gasped.

"You mean you've met her again?" Twilight asked.

He then explained all that had happened: rescuing Fluttershy from the thieves, walking her home and discovering her identity.

"Her name is Fluttershy," he sighed dreamily. "Can you imagine a more perfect name?"

"Fluttershy?" Rarity questioned. "You mean Lady Starlight's niece?"

"The very same!"

The white unicorn squealed. "I knew it! I *told* you she'd be the one!"

"And Lady Starlight's earlier invitations offer me the perfect opportunity!"

"So you're going to invite her to dinner, then? Oh, how romantic!"

"You sure that's a good idea?" Applejack asked. "I mean…she's probably overwhelmed enough knowing there's a vampire interested in her, but coming to a castle full of vampires? That's a lot to take in at once."

"What better way for us to get better acquainted?" Discord said. "If I have dinner at her place, not only might my disguise fail, but her annoying aunt will get in the way! Besides," he looked down at himself, "if she's ever to fall in love with me, she'll have to get used to the real me."

"He's right," Rarity agreed. "It's more romantic if the two of them are face-to-face without any interruptions or disguises!"

"Romantic?" His dreamy expression suddenly turned into one of panic. " *Romantic* ?! I just realized! I know nothing about romance! I don't even know how to entertain a guest!"

"Leave that to me!" Rarity exclaimed, putting her hoof around her master. "When I'm through with you, you'll be the envy of Don Juan!"

"Not *too* much like Don Juan, I hope?" Applejack whispered nervously.

"Just an expression, darling."

"We need to start planning," Twilight said. "Spike, make a list!"

"Right!" the dragon said, pulling out a quill and parchment.

"The first thing we need is food. What does Fluttershy like, Master?"

Discord bit his lip. "I…I don't know! I haven't seen her eat!"

"In that case, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, you need to go into town tomorrow and get whatever you need for a standard, yet filling, vegetarian meal."

"Can we bake a cake?!" Pinkie asked eagerly.

"Whatever you like, Pinkie."

"Oh boy! This'll be great! We haven't cooked anything in ages! You know, except for Spike's meals."

"Since we'll be entertaining our future mistress, we need to make a good first impression, so this castle has to be spick and span before tomorrow night. Spike, Rainbow Dash, you'll help me with that."

"Ugh," Rainbow groaned, her wings drooping. "I *hate* chores!"

"Let's see," Twilight said, tapping her chin. "What else do we need?"

"Ooh!" Rarity exclaimed. "Flowers! They are a simple yet amorous decoration! Oh, but which flowers?"

"Roses?"

"No, no. Too clichéd."

"Carnations?" Pinkie suggested.

"This is a dinner, not a funeral. Oh, but then again, we do sleep in coffins…"

"Daisies?" said Applejack.

"Too common! This is our master's one true love we're talking about! Are we to suggest that she's as common as a daisy? No, the flower needs to mean something special. Master, how does this mare make you feel?"

"Well," Discord said, twiddling his fingers. "She…she's so beautiful and…so pure that when I look at her…it's like I'm not worthy of her presence. It's like I've seen the face of Heaven…"

"Lilies!" Rarity shouted, making them all jump. "White lilies! They represent purity and say, 'it's heavenly to be with you!'"

"Silly, Rarity!" Pinkie snorted. "Flowers can't talk!"

The white unicorn rolled her eyes. "Trust me! White lilies are perfect!

You and Applejack must remember to pick some up while you're in town."

"And what are *you* doing?" Applejack asked with a raised eyebrow.

Discord was caught off-guard as Rarity started pushing him out of the room.

"I'll be fixing up this fixer-upper of course! Now, the first thing we need to do is to get rid of that cape and get you into something more formal…"

Fluttershy was singing her scales while her music instructor Octavia played them on the piano when Starlight burst into the room highly elated.

"Oh, Fluttershy!" she exclaimed, waving a piece of paper in the air. "I have wonderful news!"

"What, Auntie?" Fluttershy asked.

"See for yourself!"

The letter floated into Fluttershy's hooves and she read:

Dear Lady Starlight Glimmer,

I must apologize for the previous letter you've received under my name. One of my servants decided to have a bit of fun. My answer to your request is quite different from what she had expressed in her little joke.

I would be honored to meet your charming niece in person, and invite her to dinner tonight at my castle at 7:30. No entourage will be necessary.

I have ordered my servant to await your reply. If it is yes, I shall be looking forward to this evening.

Sincerely yours,

Count Discord

The writing was much neater and fancier than in the last letter, so Fluttershy figured this count was telling the truth.

"I've already said yes," Starlight explained. "Oh, we need to get ready! We need to get you cleaned up, wash your hair…just think! Count Discord hardly invites *any pony* to his castle! He must *really* be interested in you!"

"But…" Fluttershy stammered. "I thought you didn't want me married off to an 'old recluse' like him?"

"That was when I thought he'd said no, but this is the opportunity of a lifetime! Hmm. I suppose if we do up your hair a bit you'll look more sophisticated…"

While her aunt prattled on, Fluttershy's heart sank at the thought of having to meet yet *another* rich, noble suitor. The stories from Night Glider also made her uneasy. What can you expect from a stallion who lives all alone in a castle, never talking to any pony?

"Fluttershy!" Starlight gasped, snatching the garlic necklace around her niece's neck. "What is this… *horrid* piece of jewelry?!" She sniffed it and gagged. "Ugh! Smells horrible! This has to go!"

"But Auntie…" Fluttershy protested as the garlic snapped off her neck.

"You will *not* be wearing such garbage when meeting a count!"

Fluttershy sighed sadly as her aunt left with her only protection against the vampire. Since Count Discord's castle was in the forest, she feared the monster would take the opportunity to come back.

After last night, she wasn't sure what to think of the vampire. She'd been up all night again, but for different reasons. Every time she pictured the creature, she felt more than just fear. She had stayed up going over the recent events, analyzing his words, his actions, his expressions. When he had expressed his concern for her, his face had seemed sincere. And every time he had looked at her, his red pupils were wide and pleading, pleading for…she didn't know

what.

And once again, he had called her beautiful and the thought still brought heat to her cheeks. Had he meant it? Had he spared her the other night just because he thought she was…beautiful?

Even if that were true, why had he come back? Why had he saved her? Why had he treated her so courteously, as if they were old acquaintances?

She was both frightened and curious. After all, she'd always been interested in creatures of all kinds, and he was such a unique creature. She had never thought an animal could be made up of so many different body parts and still manage to keep its balance. He was so tall. She had never seen anyone's head reach so high. When he had appeared in the alley, his cape outstretched to make him look larger, it was like watching a mother bear protect her cub. And when he had spoken to her in concern, he had bent down to her eye-level, quite unlike their first meeting when he had towered over her. Then she had been his intended victim, but in that moment, it had felt like she was his…equal.

She didn't like the idea of going into the forest tonight, and she didn't know whether or not the vampire was still stalking her, but after last night, she almost believed him when he had said he wouldn't harm her. Perhaps, if she stayed in the company of others, she would be safe.

Before Rainbow Dash returned to the castle with Lady Starlight's answer, she flew above the town and scanned the marketplace. She smiled when she spotted Applejack and Pinkie, who had changed into more common garments, at a vegetable stall. She swooped down and whispered as she passed:

"She said yes!"

Pinkie squealed in excitement as the pegasus whizzed off. Applejack let out a disappointed sigh as she paid the vendor.

"Oh, this is gonna be awesome!" Pinkie exclaimed as they moved onto the next stall. "Not only do we finally have a guest, but once the Master and his mare start talking, sparks will fly and they'll get married and we'll get a mistress!"

"Uh-huh," Applejack grumbled. "Should we get pomegranates?"

The pink mare frowned and looked at her curiously. "Why the long face, Applejack? Aren't you excited about the Master getting his mate?"

"It doesn't matter how I feel about it," the orange pony huffed as she picked out some pomegranates. "It's none of my business."

"Come on, you can tell your old pal Pinkie. I won't tell the Master. Cross my heart and hope to fly, stick a cupcake in my eye!"

When she had placed her hoof on her eyelid, Applejack knew her friend was being serious. She groaned as she hung her head.

"I just…don't like the idea of him…going after an innocent young mare who probably doesn't want to…be like us and…what if he… what if he confuses this so-called 'love' for…?"

She paused. "Oh, never mind. I'm probably overreacting."

"Does this have to do with the guy who bit you?"

Applejack dropped the fruit she had been holding, making the shopkeeper cry out, "Hey! Ya drop it, ya buy it!"

"Sorry," the orange pony said as she gathered up the food. She looked sharply at Pinkie. "How many times have I told ya? Never, *ever* bring that up!"

Pinkie lowered her eyes in guilt. "Sorry. Still, you know the Master's not like that, right? Plus, there's that whole not being able to touch her without permission thing. He's not gonna do anything she doesn't like."

Applejack said nothing for a while as she paid the vendor and packed the fruit in her saddlebag.

"Pinkie," she said as the two of them continued down the street, "do ya ever think of your family?"

"Sometimes," Pinkie replied with a shrug.

"Do ya miss 'em?"

"I guess. I think of my sisters a lot, mostly Maud. I sometimes wonder if they'd like to be like us. Then again, they all love the rock farm. It'd be cruel to ask them."

"I could never ask Apple Bloom to leave the apple farm, and Big Mac's got a family now."

"You still write to them, don't you?"

"Yeah, but…they want me to visit. Can you imagine, me showing up looking twenty years younger than I should be, and as if that isn't suspicious enough, I refuse to eat baked apple goods?" She sighed and took an apple out of her bag. "I miss apples."

"Yeah," Pinkie nodded solemnly. "I miss cake, and ice cream, and cupcakes, and pies…"

"See why I'm not big on the idea of the Master finding a mate? If this becomes serious, Pinkie, that mare will be like us. She'll have to give up everything: her family, her friends, real food."

"Oh. I see what you mean. Well, if she loves him, it'll be alright, won't it? Doesn't love require sacrifice or something?"

"It's a big sacrifice," Applejack murmured.

"And being a vampire isn't all bad. I mean we get awesome powers and stuff! Plus, we never have to worry about getting sick! I always *hated* colds! Best of all, we don't have to get married to boring old stiffs and go through the pains of childbirth like all the other mares!"

"' *Can't* 'would be a more appropriate word."

"The point is that as bloodsucking, gravity-defying, super strong vampires, we can do whatever we want!"

"Except have lives."

Pinkie huffed. "You're a real grumpy-pants, you know that, AJ? If you hate being a vampire so much, why do you stick around?"

Applejack shot her a dangerous glare. "You know good and well why! Now let's quit wasting time and get ingredients for the cake, okay?"

"Sheesh," Pinkie said as the orange mare stormed ahead of her. "Grumpy, grumpy, grumpy."

When Applejack and Pinkie returned with their groceries, Spike and Twilight were waiting in the kitchen, the latter looking grim.

"What's up?" Pinkie asked.

"I just realized something," Twilight said, trying to keep a calm tone. "The Master hasn't had anything to drink in a while. He didn't catch anything two nights ago because he was distracted by his mate, and he didn't have anything last night for the same reasons."

Applejack looked down at Spike and finally understood why he was here. "Twilight, no…"

"We may not have another choice. We dined two nights ago, we should be fine, but after going so long without blood, the Master may not be able to control himself around…"

"We can get him something tonight!"

"There isn't time. Lady Fluttershy's coming in early evening, and we can't have him dining in front of her. It would be…unflattering."

"We'll just get him to get away from her for a few seconds and give him a quick drink!"

"You're forgetting, Applejack," Twilight said impatiently through her teeth, "that Lady Fluttershy's is not the *only* beating heart that will be around the Master."

She tilted her head towards Spike and Applejack looked back at him.

"Would you rather the Master take *some* of his blood or *all* ?"

"It's okay, Applejack," Spike assured her. "I don't mind."

After locking gaze with him for a long while, Applejack sighed relentlessly.

"Leave us," she muttered to the mares.

Twilight and Pinkie stepped quietly out of the room while Applejack removed something from a drawer. It was a conical cup with a long tube attached to its bottom and a long needle coming out of its rim. Spike pulled up a chair and rolled up his sleeve readily. They used the same instrument doctors used for blood transfusions, only instead of transferring the blood into another body it would drip into a bucket.

"Now hold still," Applejack said as she placed the bucket beneath his arm and sat across from him. "I'll make sure it doesn't hurt much. Do ya wanna hold my hoof again?"

Spike shook his head. "I can take it."

"If ya say so."

She took his arm and slowly moved the cup towards it, the needle glinting in the candlelight. Spike watched it nervously. Because of his thick skin, they had to use a longer needle than they had used for Twilight.

"On second thought," he gulped, grabbing her hoof with his free claw, "just for fun."

Applejack smiled slightly, then frowned again. "Let me know if ya start to feel dizzy."

"Go on. I trust you, AJ."

He winced and Applejack bit her lip as the needle pierced his skin.

"Ow, ow," he breathed.

"You alright?" Applejack asked in concern.

He nodded as his breathing steadied. "Yeah."

He opened his eyes and saw the solemnness in her face as she watched his blood fill up the cup and fall through the tube and drip into the bucket.

"I've always wondered. How come this doesn't bother you?"

"Believe me," Applejack said under her breath, "it bothers me."

"No, no. I mean how come you're able to do this without…losing control?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Master Discord always said I was a strange one when it came to my thirst for blood. I don't know why I'm so resistant compared to the others. I just…am."

"Well, I'm glad. I mean I consider all of you family, but you're the only one I can trust with this. Even Twilight with her being so new to this would have trouble containing herself."

"I wish I didn't have to be the one to do this though."

"Hey," Spike said, patting her hoof. "This is my choice, okay?"

"But you're just so young…"

"I'm fifteen, practically an adult!"

"You're also very small…"

"You calling me short?"

She released a snort of laughter. "No! It's just we can only take so much from you."

"I'll do whatever it takes to help you guys, even if it costs me my life."

"Well," Applejack said as she gently removed the needle, "hopefully

it won't come to that. That should be enough for the Master, don't you think?"

She set down the mechanism and went to get a fresh bandage from the drawer.

"So, out of curiosity," Spike said as she began wrapping his arm, "if you guys *did* have to change me, how do you think I'd look?"

He cried out as Applejack pulled a bit too hard.

"Sorry," she said, ripping the gauze and tying it up.

"You think I'll get bat wings too?" Spike asked eagerly.

"Don't know. Might be different for dragons."

"Think I'll get super strong muscles?" He gasped. "Maybe I'll get taller!"

Once Applejack was done bandaging him, he stood on the chair and flexed his arms.

"Watch out!" he said in a deep voice. "Count Spike-ula's coming to get ya!"

Applejack suppressed a giggle, before resuming her grim expression. "Now, now, Sugar. Being a vampire ain't all it's cracked up to be. You'd be the same age for all eternity…"

"Exactly! How cool would it be to be immortal?! And all I'd have to worry about are wooden stakes and garlic! You think I'd be good-looking like all of you?"

If Applejack could blush, she would be doing so at that moment.

"Hey! Maybe Rarity will even change her mind about me?"

She frowned and placed her hooves on his shoulders.

"Spike," she said firmly, gently pushing him down, "ya know you're not the one for her. Vampires only…"

"I know, I know," he grumbled, rolling his eyes. "Vampires only fall in love once and are destined for one and one alone, blah, blah, blah. But maybe it doesn't work until I'm of age or something."

"I don't think…"

"I mean it doesn't always happen at first sight, right? Twilight said that's a mere technicality. Didn't it take Master Discord a few seconds before he knew that mare was his mate?"

"I wouldn't get ya hopes up…"

"I'll be eighteen in less than three years! Maybe *then* she'll notice me!"

"It *doesn't* work like that, Spike!"

She had shouted that last statement and she immediately regretted it when she saw the flicker of fright in the dragon's face. She took a deep breath.

"Look. I just don't want ya to get your hopes up for something that might never happen, and as for you becoming a vampire, I don't think you'll want that kind of life."

He smiled as he hopped off the chair. "Hey," he said, putting a claw on his shoulder. "My home is with Twilight, always has, always will be, which makes this place my home now. Like it or not," he playfully punched her shoulder, "you guys are stuck with me forever."

She returned his smile, but her eyes were still sad. Spike was her dearest friend in the world, and the last thing she wanted was for him to suffer the same fate as hers.

Rarity had been coaching Discord all through the night and all through the morning in his chamber. His eyes were weary as he didn't usually stay up this late.

"Again," Rarity ordered.

Discord groaned. "But we've already ran through it five hundred times!"

"Then this shouldn't be a problem for you. Now, what do you say when she walks in?"

He smiled and bowed to Rarity graciously. "Lady Fluttershy, it is a pleasure to see you again."

"No, no, no! What have I told you? Put emphasis on 'pleasure!' Make it low and seductive, but soft and sincere enough so she knows that you mean it!"

Discord rolled his eyes and tried again. "Lady Fluttershy, it is a *pleasure* to see you again."

"Good. Now, take my hoof."

She held out her hoof for him to take and he brought it to his lips.

"Fang!" she warned.

Discord put his claw to his mouth and realized his right fang was sticking out. "Oh, right."

He pinched his left nostril and inhaled sharply through the other one. His tooth retracted into his mouth.

"Sorry. That darn thing never goes in when I want it to."

" *Now* you may kiss my hoof."

He brought her hoof to his mouth and pressed his lips against it.

"No!" Rarity huffed. "Do you want to slobber all over her?! She's a *mare* , not a slab of meat! Treat her hoof like a delicate piece of glass that could break at the slightest touch. Of course, you don't want it to break."

Discord sighed and brought her hoof up to his lips again, slowly this time, and kissed it lightly.

"There. Now, take me to the table. Hold out my chair for me."

He led her to a wooden chair, pulled it out and waited for her to lower herself before pushing it under her.

"Now," Rarity said, folding her hooves on her lap. "What sort of topics will you bring up for conversation?"

"Ask about her likes and dislikes?" Discord asked hopefully.

"Correct. What else?"

"Her childhood?"

"No, no. More *personal* conversations come at the second date. You don't want her to break into tears from some tragic event from her childhood, do you? She has to feel comfortable crying in front of you first."

He groaned as his arms drooped to his sides. "Why are there so many rules? I mean as if the mating rules weren't bad enough, why does simply having dinner with a female have to be so complicated?!"

"If you want to win her heart, you have to *work* for it. Not that we females are prizes to be won, of course, but love is something that has to be *earned* ."

He sighed as he slumped against the wall and slid to the floor. "Is there a point to all this? I mean…would she even stay once she sees who I am? I didn't tell her my name for a reason, you know? Even if she doesn't run away, would she even like me?"

"Oh, Master," Rarity said sympathetically, getting up and touching his shoulder. "You may not be the most… *refined* creature in the world, but you have your good points. You're…you're…you're very gifted in music! You play the piano so beautifully! And you…you've got an excellent sense of humor! Why, just a few weeks ago you made Pinkie laugh so hard she squirted blood out of her nose! Let's see, you're…you're also very kind and merciful. After all, you saved my life as well as Twilight's and Applejack's. You're also very philosophical! Mares like a stallion with brains!"

"I'm not a stallion," he grumbled.

"That's right, you're not. You're *better* than stallions! Most stallions…" her face suddenly became sullen, "most stallions think they can do whatever they like with mares, whether she shows interest in him or not." She forced a smile. "So I'm sure once Fluttershy sees how much you respect her, she'll see what a gentlecolt you are, so to speak."

"But she's a *lady* !"

"So? You're a count."

He huffed. "You know that's just a cover-up. She's of noble birth. I might as well be entertaining the Princess!"

"Oh, I doubt she's that picky. I mean I have yet to meet this mare but from how you describe her, she sounds like a nice girl. Didn't you say she stopped you from drinking those thieves even though they had tried to rob her? She's clearly good-hearted. Maybe she won't judge you too quickly."

"She *does* have a good heart, doesn't she?" Discord said, looking off into space. "I…I've never seen any pony do such a kind thing to such vile creatures." A smile tugged at his lips. "She's such an angel…"

A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts.

"WHAT?!" he barked in annoyance.

"Uh," Applejack's shaky voice replied, "I got ya something to drink, sir."

Discord willed the door to open and he cocked his head at the goblet and tray in Applejack's hoof.

"Huh?"

"Ya haven't had anything to drink in five days," Applejack explained as she approached him.

"I haven't?" he said, stroking his beard. "I haven't been feeling particularly thirsty."

"All the same, you should have something before tonight. We don't want any…accidents."

He stood up and looked at the orange mare in disgust. "I would *never* lose control around her!"

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "I'm not just talking about our guest. Are ya forgetting our little dragon friend?"

Discord sighed as he took the goblet. "Sorry."

He raised it to his lips and gulped down its contents.

"Ah," he breathed, licking his mouth. "Didn't realize how thirsty I was."

"Well," Applejack said grimly, taking the cup back, "we have a little more if ya want some later, but don't get greedy!"

She trotted sourly out the door and shut it with a slight *bang!*

"Is it just me, or is she moodier than usual?" Discord asked.

"She's just upset about us taking blood from Spike," Rarity said, taking out a handkerchief to wipe her master's mouth. "Now, I was thinking, perhaps you should present Lady Fluttershy with a gift tonight."

"A gift?" he said, swatting her hoof away. "What sort of gift do you give a mare?"

"Well, there's always flowers, but I was thinking of something more permanent. It would be more impressive to give her something personal, but as we don't know much about her, we should start small and simple, like a piece of jewelry of some kind."

"Jewelry?" Discord stroked his beard in thought. "Let's see…"

He thought about Fluttershy and what he knew about her. Well, she

was beautiful. That was a given. She had a gentle heart as far as he could tell. He thought of her name and how it sounded like "butterfly."

Then he had an idea and waved his claw, making a small necklace appear.

"How about this?"

Rarity took the necklace with her magic to examine it. It was a simple necklace with a thin gold chain and a tiny pink jeweled pendant in the shape of a butterfly.

"Oh, perfect!" she exclaimed. "And you said she has pink hair, so it will match!"

Discord summoned a red velvet jewelry case to place the necklace in and stared at it dreamily. She was going to love it, he knew it. He was going to sweep her off her hooves tonight and they would live happily ever after.

Rarity seemed to be reading his thoughts. "Now remember, Master. These things take time. Even if things go well tonight, you mustn't rush. She doesn't know about vampire mating laws and it's best that it stays that way for a while. It would overwhelm the poor thing! I don't believe you could actually hurt her, but…I'd have to agree with Applejack. You must be careful."

"I know," Discord sighed dreamily as he closed the box. "But still, if things go right tonight, she'll be one step closer to being mine."

Rarity crossed her hooves. "Discord…"

"I mean I'll be hers, or we'll be each other's…you know what I mean! The point is that we're destined for each other, so we have to end up together." He turned away with a determined look on his face. "We simply *have* to."

Apparently carnations are a funeral flower in Romania (or was it that lilies are wedding flowers? I forget).

That instrument Applejack was using is based on Blundell's Impellor. Not sure I described its use correctly.

For Dinner?

Meant to have this up for Halloween, but took longer than I expected. Oh well, it's still Halloween in some places.

Fluttershy was sitting at her vanity, watching as Coco Pommel styled her hair up into a bun. She was wearing the same dress she had worn for Lord Fancy Pants. Her aunt had said it had worked so well on him that it should work on Count Discord. She was also wearing the same emerald necklace, which sparkled so much that Fluttershy had to be careful where she looked in the mirror.

"Oh, darling, you look simply divine!" Starlight said, coming up behind Fluttershy. "You could stun a prince into dumbness!"

"Aunt Starlight?" Fluttershy asked weakly. "I've been wondering. What if…what if the Count doesn't like me?"

"Nonsense! How can he *not* like you? You're a noblemare, you have an admirable dowry, *and* you're a delicate beauty." She sighed in thought. "Oh, to be young again. Seems like only yesterday I was preparing to meet *my* future husband."

"Yes, but…what if I like him, but he doesn't like me? Or he likes me, but I don't like him? Would we even get along?"

Starlight huffed. "I *told* you, dear. It doesn't matter whether or not you get along. What matters is that the two of you are well off and that you are able to keep the bloodline going."

"But…to have children…don't you have to…?"

Fluttershy's cheeks turned beet red.

"Don't worry, dear. You won't have to do it *that* often if you don't want to, just until you can produce a son."

"What if I want a girl?"

"Worry about an heir first. Then you can try for a daughter." Starlight sighed again and looked up at a portrait of an old stallion. "Too bad your uncle passed before we could have a child of our own. I was going to remarry, but then you came along, so I didn't see the point."

Once Coco was done with her hair, Fluttershy turned to her aunt. "Did you… *like* your husband?"

Starlight shrugged. "He was too old to care much. We were only married for a few weeks. He assured my comfort, though, so I suppose he cared for me a little. Oh well. Hopefully your husband will have a stronger body."

Fluttershy was now even more uncomfortable than she had been before her aunt started talking. There were so many ways one could interpret that last sentence, and she didn't like either implication. What was the point of getting married if she couldn't love her husband, or at least get along with him? Why would she bother having children with him if she didn't like him? She knew how children were made, and she didn't like the idea of getting that close to some pony she disliked.

Get ahold of yourself, Fluttershy , she said in her head. *You haven't even met him yet and already you're worrying about not getting along. Maybe he's nice. Yes. He might be a good match for you.*

I hope.

"Now remember," Rarity said as she adjusted Discord's dinner jacket. "Listen to whatever she says, for when you are having a lady over for dinner, there is nothing more interesting than her."

All of them were gathered in the main foyer. Twilight was checking things off her list while Rarity was brushing the lint off Discord.

"Lilies, check," Twilight said, glancing at the vases of lilies decorating the walls.

"And *all of you* ," Rarity said, turning to the others, "not a word about our mating laws!"

"She's right. It would come as a shock to her."

" *I'd* be shocked too if a bloodthirsty vampire who tried to eat me claimed to be my one true love who I'm supposed to be destined to be with forever and ever," Pinkie piped.

Discord tugged on the collar of his shirt. "Is it just me, or did it suddenly get warmer in here?"

"You're not *nervous* , are ya, Master?" Rainbow Dash smirked.

"Nervous?!" he squeaked, twiddling his fingers. "Me?! Nah! Why should I be nervous? After all, I'm just going to be spending an entire evening with the love of my life…alone…just the two of us…" He started fanning himself. "Does anyone have a hanky? I think I'm sweating!"

"Vampires don't sweat, Master," Twilight stated.

"We don't?"

"No. We don't carry water in our bodies."

"Oh. Well, I'm still hot!"

"It's going to be fine, Master," Rarity assured him. "Just be yourself, stay composed, and above all," she pulled on his beard so she could look him in the eye, "be a gentlecolt!"

"Yes, ma'am!" Discord squeaked as she let go of his beard.

He jumped as he heard the thump from the doorknocker.

"It's her!" he yelped, grabbing his tail. "It's her, it's her, it's her!"

"Deep breaths," Rarity directed him. "In, out. In, out."

"I'll answer the door," Twilight said, handing her clipboard to Spike. "Applejack, you, Pinkie and Spike should get back to the kitchen."

"Aye, aye, sir!" Pinkie saluted before bouncing off with the other two.

"She's not going to like me," Discord muttered to himself. "She's not going to like me."

"Yes, she will!" Rarity insisted. "Well, she won't if you keep making a fool of yourself!"

Outside, Starlight and Fluttershy were standing at the doorstep. Double Diamond and Party Favor were waiting at the gate with the carriage. Starlight was fanning herself while Fluttershy was looking up at the castle in awe.

Its walls were as black as night. If not for the faint glow from the windows, it would have been invisible. There were hardly any windows at all, only two narrow ones beside the door and four on the second floor, all their curtains drawn. There weren't even windows in the high towers. Fluttershy almost fell backward trying to see their tops, but it was impossible with how they blended into the darkness.

"Charming place, isn't it?" Starlight asked casually.

"It's so…dark," Fluttershy replied softly. "Why are there so few windows, and why are all the curtains drawn at night?"

Her aunt shrugged. "He obviously likes his privacy, but oh my, what an estate!"

The door opened and they were met with a lavender unicorn. Fluttershy stopped herself from gasping at her bright red eyes, which wasn't a common color for ponies.

"Evening!" Starlight said, curtsying with a bright smile. "I am Lady…"

"Which one of you is the Lady Fluttershy?" Twilight inquired, looking between the mares.

Starlight was taken aback at being interrupted, but kept up her grin and gestured toward her niece. "Oh, yes. My niece, Fluttershy. Might I say, what a *charming* castle you…"

"Come on in, domnişoară," Twilight said, opening the door further. "Count Discord is expecting you."

Fluttershy gulped as she stepped in. Her aunt tried to follow her, but Twilight obstructed her path.

"I'm sorry, but who are you?"

Starlight's jaw dropped. "Who am *I* ?! I'm the Lady Starlight Glimmer!"

"I'm sure you are, but I believe the invitation said no entourage was necessary."

" *Entourage* ?! I'm her *aunt* !"

"Nevertheless, the invitation was solely for the Lady Fluttershy, and it is only Lady Fluttershy I have orders to admit."

"Well!" Starlight huffed. "This is an outrage! You can't expect me to stand out here all night, do you?!"

"I see you brought a coach with you. It's best you went home. Don't worry about your niece. We will arrange transportation for her."

"Insolence! You tell your master that unless he lets me in, I will…!"

Twilight slammed the door before she could finish. Fluttershy was staring at the unicorn with wide eyes.

"Charming aunt, you have," Twilight commented.

Fluttershy was too much in awe to speak. She'd never seen any pony talk to her aunt that way, let alone a servant!

"Well," Twilight said, walking past her. "Shall we?"

Fluttershy nodded and followed the unicorn down the hallway. She was amazed at how it lacked decoration. No portraits, no mirrors, just burning torchlights along the black stone walls. Finding nothing interesting in her surroundings, she turned her attention to the unicorn. She was wearing an unusual eggplant gown. It was long,

sleek and tight around her waist, its neck open and laced at the front. But the oddest thing about it was the long, narrow slits in the sides. She also noticed a curious round bauble around the unicorn's neck and could've sworn something was bobbing inside it.

The hallway seemed to go on forever, so Fluttershy decided to make conversation with the unicorn.

"So…how long have you worked for the Count?"

"Not long," the servant replied with a shrug. "Just a few months. I'm Twilight, by the way. Twilight Sparkle."

"Nice to meet you, Twilight. So, the Count…what's he like?"

Twilight looked at her in confusion. "He said you'd met before."

"Have we?" Fluttershy asked, cocking her head.

"He must not have told you his name." Twilight sighed and shook her head. "Oh, Discord."

"I…suppose I could've bumped into him in the street and he failed to tell me his name, or he did and I'd simply forgotten."

"Oh, I think you'd remember the Count."

"Well, if you'd tell me what he looks like, it might jog my memory."

Twilight bit her lip nervously. "You'll remember him once you see him, but…I must prepare you, domnişoară. He's not very…ordinary."

"Oh, I don't mind if he's not that handsome."

The unicorn smiled slightly. "That's good, but…it still might be a bit shocking."

"Is that why he stays cooped up in this castle all day? He's afraid of what ponies may think of his looks? Well that's a little silly. Why should he care what others think of him?"

"It's not really easy when you're a…"

"Ah, Lady Fluttershy."

Fluttershy stiffened at the familiar voice and looked ahead of her. She gasped at the tall figure awaiting her by the marble staircase in the foyer. He was wearing a clean black suit and had lost his cape, but there was no mistaking him. She tried backing away, but Twilight stopped her with her hoof and pushed her forward.

Count Discord stepped towards her with a giddy smile on his face.

"It is a *pleasure* ," he purred, bowing to her and holding out his paw, "to see you again."

She stared at him, not noticing his outstretched paw. When he realized she wasn't taking it anytime soon, he frowned slightly as he lowered it.

"Y-You're…" she stammered, "you're…C-Count D-Discord?"

"Surprise!" Discord exclaimed, holding out his hands. "Didn't take me for nobility, did you?"

Fluttershy said nothing. So many questions were swimming through her head. Discord coughed and straightened up.

"Allow me to introduce you to my staff. You've already met Twilight. Tell me, Twilight, what do you think of my guest?"

"She's very lovely, Master," Twilight nodded approvingly. "And she seems very sweet."

"S-S-Sweet?" Fluttershy stuttered.

She glanced nervously at the unicorn, focusing particularly on her red eyes and how similar in color they were to her master's. She looked at the slits in her dress and began wondering if this pony was really a pony at all.

"This is Rainbow Dash," Discord said as a multi-colored pegasus came into view, "one of my most loyal servants."

"Pleased to meet ya!" Rainbow said, shaking Fluttershy's hoof

eagerly.

"Likewise!" Fluttershy squeaked, pulling her hoof away.

Rainbow's eyes were a sort of violet with a reddish tint, though not as red as Twilight's. She thought her masculine attire was odd but still fairly normal-looking.

"And this is Rarity," Discord said, gesturing to a white unicorn. "She's been with me the longest."

"Not *that* long," Rarity giggled awkwardly.

This unicorn wore a dress similar to Twilight's, only blue like her eyes. Fluttershy squinted at her in familiarity.

"Do I know you?"

Rarity gasped. "Oh, yes! In the boutique the other day!" She looked over Fluttershy's dress. "I see you took my advice, though that necklace, dear! *Much* too extravagant for that dress! You need something simpler!" She smirked up at Discord. "Don't you think, Master?"

"Huh?" Discord uttered. "Oh, yes! I have just the thing!"

He snapped his fingers and Fluttershy gasped as a red velvet box appeared in his paw and claw. He knelt down to her and opened the box and she gaped in awe at the pretty pink butterfly necklace inside.

"Do you like it?" Discord asked, biting his lip in anticipation. "I made it just for you. I mean 'Fluttershy,' 'butterfly,' it sounded right!"

"Oh," Fluttershy uttered softly. "Y-Yes, I…I love butterflies."

He grinned. "Excellent!" He lifted the chain from the box, which was now floating in midair. "Would you allow me to…?"

"Oh, um, yes."

She turned around slowly and stiffened as his paw and claw went

over her head. She watched him cautiously out of the corner of her eye. His face was awfully close and she could feel his breath on her neck. She didn't even realize he'd replaced the emerald necklace with the butterfly one until he had moved away.

"Oh, yes!" Rarity exclaimed, clapping her hooves in approval. "*Much* better! Don't worry. You'll get your necklace back before the evening is over."

"Excuse me, but…" Fluttershy attempted to say. "W-What is going on?"

"Didn't you read the invitation?" Rainbow asked.

Rarity smacked her over the head.

"You're here for dinner, of course!" Discord said excitedly.

Fluttershy gulped, wondering what he meant by that statement. Had she been invited to *eat* dinner…or to *be* dinner?

"Ahem," Rarity coughed. "Perhaps we should proceed to the dining room?"

"Yes, yes!" Discord exclaimed, stepping to Fluttershy's side and holding out his lion arm for her. "Allow me to escort you, domnişoară?"

She stared anxiously at his arm. Discord frowned when she didn't accept his gesture yet again and folded his paw and claw behind his back.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat. "Follow me."

He walked to a pair of double doors and looked over his shoulder to see if Fluttershy was following, but she was still frozen in place, her knees buckling. Rarity gave her a gentle nudge and her hooves began moving automatically.

"Kinda skittish, isn't she?" Rainbow whispered to Twilight.

"Oh, she's just nervous," Rarity said, waving her hoof. "She'll feel

more comfortable as the evening progresses."

Fluttershy glanced uneasily between the draconequus in front of her and the three mares trotting slowly behind her. She hadn't expected this vampire to have companions. What were *their* stories? Were they really just servants or…had they been his victims? She remembered Discord had asked her if she preferred dying or becoming a vampire. Had these mares been asked the same question? Were they vampires too?

They *did* have an odd sort of glamor about them. Their coats were so smooth and clean, their manes were long and luscious, their eyes vibrant colors. Even the pegasus in male attire seemed unnaturally pretty, and they all walked and flew with a sort of grace. But their gazes were also unsettling, especially Twilight's. They were paying such close attention to her, almost expectantly. But expectant for what? Were they thinking about how delicious her blood would taste? Was that why Discord had kept her alive for so long, so he could share her with his minions?

The double doors flung open automatically into the dining room. Before them was a long mahogany dining table, a small, black, red-cushioned chair on one end and a red and black throne on the other. A blazing fireplace and crystal chandelier provided warmth and light for the room. Several vases of lilies adorned the walls, one serving as a centerpiece for the table.

Discord went behind the smaller chair and pulled it out for Fluttershy.

"My lady," he said with a bow, gesturing to the open seat.

Fluttershy stared at him warily as she slowly sat herself in the chair. He pushed her back in and hastened to the throne on the other end.

"Well!" Rarity exclaimed, glancing between the two. "We should probably go help get dinner ready, so we'll just leave you two… *alone* ."

Fluttershy opened her mouth to say something, but the three mares had already disappeared into the next room. She looked at the

vampire across from her. He was leaning his head on his paw and claw, staring at her elatedly. Her ears perked up as music started playing. After glancing around, she realized it was coming from a floating violin playing itself.

The long, awkward moment of speechlessness would've been silent had it not been for the music. Fluttershy had no idea what to do. She wished her aunt hadn't taken away her garlic, for she would feel a lot more confident if she had it right now. What was the Count planning? If he really was going to suck her blood, what was with the flowers, the music and the necklace he had given her?

"You look lovely tonight."

She jumped at his voice and gulped as a new thought occurred to her. She remembered reading one story of a male vampire seducing virgin mares to his bed before sucking them dry. Was that *his* game?

"So, Fluttershy," Discord said, putting down his hands and leaning forward, "tell me about yourself."

She had forgotten all knowledge of speech. She was too terrified and confused to even try to recall words.

Fortunately, she didn't have to, for at that moment, the door to the kitchen opened up and what came out made her gasp in such wonder that for a moment, she forgot her situation.

"Is that…?" she squealed so loudly it made Spike and Discord jump. "A BABY DRAGON!" As Spike cautiously approached her, she leaned forward and said, "Oh, I've never seen a baby dragon before! He's *so* adorable!"

Spike blushed and rubbed the back of his neck. "Oh, uh, thank you."

"Oh, and he talks! I didn't know dragons could talk! This is just so… so amazing!"

"Wow. Master Discord wasn't kidding when he said you were…"

He glanced at his master, who was currently feeling a mixture of

awe and anger. He had never seen Fluttershy smile and the new light in her face made her ten times more radiant. However, he was sour that that happiness was directed at Spike rather than himself. So he sent the dragon a warning glare. Spike shrank under his gaze and cleared his throat.

"Yes, well," he said, straightening up. "Good evening, domnişoară. My name is Spike. I will be your server tonight."

"Oh, pardon me for asking, but," Fluttershy said, her gaze not leaving Spike, "wherever did you come from?"

He blinked. "Uh…the kitchen?"

"I believe," Discord said, trying to keep up a smile, "the young lady was asking how I managed to obtain a dragon, Spike." He turned to Fluttershy. "Spike is actually a companion of Twilight's. She raised him from an egg."

Fluttershy looked up at Discord in alarm, as if just remembering he was there. Then she glanced back at Spike. Judging by the heat in his cheeks, he didn't appear like an undead vampire. Then again, he appeared so young. Did they raise creatures until they were mature enough to feed?

"Anyway," Spike said, clearing his throat again. "Would you like anything to drink?"

"Drink?!" Fluttershy squeaked, glancing nervously at Discord.

"We have tea, wine, apple juice…"

"Oh," she sighed in relief. "Just water, please."

"Can do."

As Spike walked past Discord, he whispered, "And you, Master?"

"Oh, no, I'm fine."

But one look at Fluttershy, whose eyes were on him, and his mouth was suddenly dry.

"On second thought," he murmured. "I'll have a small glass."

Spike bowed and exited into the kitchen, leaving the two of them alone once more, but it wasn't as awkward now that Fluttershy had something to ask.

"Um," she stammered, "s-so…your servants, are they, um…?"

"Are they like me?" Discord finished for her. "Yes and no. They're all normal vampires, at least the mares are. Spike's as mortal as any other creature. But don't worry, I told them all to stay in their pony forms to make you feel more comfortable."

Fluttershy nodded. She *really* didn't want to see what other forms they took.

"So…did you…?"

He frowned. He knew this topic would come up eventually. He had just hoped it wouldn't come up tonight.

"Y-Yes," he uttered. "Most of them, anyway."

She raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean… *most* of them?"

"So, you like dragons, huh?!"

He propped his elbow on the table and leaned casually onto his paw. He was eager to change the subject.

"Oh, uh…sure," Fluttershy said, looking down at her hooves.

"What other things do you like?"

She bit her lip. "Well, uh…I like… *all* animals. I…I like learning about them and…taking care of them."

He gulped and said in a shrill voice, "You…you don't say!" His elbow slipped out from under him, so he switched to his eagle arm. "What animal is your favorite?"

"B-Bunnies," she stuttered. "I have one. His name is Angel. He's the

one you almost…"

"Right!" he squeaked, tugging the collar of his shirt. "Good times!"

Of all the females he had to fall in love with, it had to be an animal lover! If she knew just how many animals he had killed…

"Here's your drink, sir!"

"Oh, thank darkness!" Discord cried in exasperation, swiping the golden goblet from Spike's tray and pouring the contents down his throat.

Fluttershy watched in horror as Discord scarfed down the red liquid. It didn't take her long to figure out what that liquid was.

"Um…" she said with shiver. "Whose is…?"

He was suddenly conscious of Fluttershy and pulled the goblet away from his lips. She shrieked at his blood-stained mouth. Spike quickly leapt onto the table to wipe his master's mouth.

"Apologies," Discord said, forcing a laugh. "I get thirsty when I'm, uh…nervous."

He flashed a grin. Fluttershy recoiled at the redness of his teeth. Spike whispered in Discord's ear and he immediately closed his mouth.

"Smooth," the dragon murmured as he leapt off the table.

He picked up the silver tray holding a second golden goblet and brought it to Fluttershy. She peered in it cautiously.

"Don't worry," Spike said with an assuring smile. "It's just water."

She saw the clearness of the liquid and took the goblet. She raised it to her lips but hesitated. What if they intended to poison her, or put her to sleep with a potion? She glanced at Discord anxiously and set the cup down.

"On second thought," she said uneasily, "I'm not thirsty."

Spike shrugged and turned to leave, but Discord grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Since you're so interested in dragons, Domnişoară Fluttershy," he said, spinning Spike around to face the mare, "why don't you ask Spike some questions?"

"Huh?" the dragon uttered.

"She likes you," Discord whispered. "Start talking and maybe she'll feel more comfortable."

"Oh, okay." Spike looked back at Fluttershy. "So, what do you want to know about dragons, domnişoară?"

She scooted to the edge of her seat, her intrigue overcoming her fear. "Absolutely *everything* ."

"Well, I started out from a purple polka-dotted egg…"

As Spike told his story, Fluttershy listened intently, Discord watching her in entrancement. She looked so adorable with her mane up in a bun, though he had the urge to gently release it from its hold and let it fall gracefully down her shoulders. Her face glowed as a smile crept across her face and her eyes sparked with excitement. This made her so alluring, if only he could be the cause of such happiness.

"So you can breathe fire?" Fluttershy inquired.

"Oh, yeah," Spike said proudly. "Wanna see?"

Fluttershy nodded eagerly and the dragon inhaled deeply before shooting a green flame into the air. She gasped in awe. Then Discord had an idea.

"You know," he piped, " *I* can turn into a dragon!"

Fluttershy snapped to him in surprise. "You can…what?"

"It's true." He lifted his right leg and rolled up his pants (making Fluttershy blush) to show off the green scales beneath. "I can turn

into any animal as long as it's part of my body."

Fluttershy blinked at him and then recalled something. "That's…how you were able to turn into a pony last night, right? And…I saw you turn into a bat earlier."

"Yes!" Discord grinned, lowering his leg. "Care for a demonstration?"

"Uh…"

"It's okay," Spike assured her. "He won't bite."

"You sure?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"Well. He won't bite *you* anyway. Not y—"

"So, what would you like me to turn into?" Discord hastily said, gesturing to his mismatched body. "A ferocious lion?"

Fluttershy gasped as he suddenly transformed into a golden lion with a black mane, his eyes the only thing that hadn't changed.

"Or perhaps a docile deer?"

The lion morphed into a small, gray deer. Fluttershy relaxed as her fear subsided a little.

"Or how about your favorite beast?"

Fluttershy let out a shriek and nearly fell out of her chair as the deer was suddenly replaced with an enormous green dragon whose head reached the ceiling.

"What do you think?" the large dragon asked in a booming voice.

Fluttershy nodded speedily. "Nice! Very, uh, impressive!"

Discord shrank down into his original form, extremely pleased that he had finally made an impression on her.

"Of course, I can only stay in one of those forms for an hour at a time," he explained, "which is why I don't walk around incognito a lot."

"Oh," Fluttershy breathed as she recovered from the shock. "Can… can any of the others do that?"

"Oh, no. This is more of a draconequus thing. The ladies have their own special abilities."

She glanced nervously at the kitchen door. "You…you said you asked them to stay in their… *pony* forms. W-What do they…?"

"Spike!" Applejack interrupted, poking her head into the room. "What's taking ya so long? I need ya to taste the soup!"

"Sorry, AJ!" Spike said, rushing into the kitchen. "Be right there!"

As Spike ran inside, Applejack gave Fluttershy a long, worrisome look before shutting the door.

"That's Applejack," said Discord, "one of my cooks."

"Why did she want Spike to…taste the soup?" Fluttershy asked.

"None of us can eat real food. I mean we can, but it tastes awful and gives us indigestion. That's why we need Spike to make sure the food won't be terrible for you."

The kitchen door opened again and Spike came in, pushing a trolley with a silver soup bowl on top.

"Soup's on!" he said with a laugh. "Do you like tomato?"

She stared in suspicion as he scooped some of the red liquid into her bowl.

"Are you sure it's…tomato?"

Spike looked at the color of the soup and chuckled. "You really should stop worrying about what we give you, domnişoară. We wouldn't give you blood while you're still mortal."

Discord cleared his throat and Spike returned to pouring soup into Fluttershy's bowl. Once again, she hesitated to touch it.

"Something wrong?" Discord asked in concern.

Did she not like tomato soup? Did she think it probably wasn't good enough?!

"Want me to taste it for you?" Spike offered.

"Yes, please," Fluttershy said a little too quickly.

The dragon took her spoon, scooped up some soup and brought it to his lips to sip.

"See? No poison. I'll go get you a new spoon."

"No need," Discord said, snapping his fingers.

Fluttershy was surprised once again as a new spoon appeared beside her bowl. Convinced that the soup was safe, she took a spoonful and tried it. After dwelling on the taste, she hungrily scooped some more into her mouth. Both Discord and Spike smiled.

"I'll tell Applejack you like it!" the dragon exclaimed, backing the trolley into the kitchen. "She'll be happy to hear it!"

There was silence after Spike had left once again, the only sound being the clang of Fluttershy's spoon against her bowl. Discord could not help but admire the dainty way she was eating her soup. Her sips were so quiet they were inaudible, and she was taking them at a speed that was quick enough to satisfy her hunger, but slow enough so that hunger wouldn't show. He wondered if that's how she would feed if she were a vampire, and the image excited him.

Fluttershy's eating slowed when she noticed her host's gaze on her. She glanced up at him.

"What?"

"Sorry!" he grunted, straightening up. "I, uh, didn't mean to stare but…" He rubbed the back of his neck as he tried to think of a new topic. "You, uh…look very lovely tonight."

She looked back at her soup. "Thank you."

He tugged on his collar as he began feeling hot again. "So, uh…do you have any other interests besides…animals?"

"W-Well," she stammered, "I…I like flowers."

"Really?!" he squealed. Realizing he said this a little too loudly, he coughed and repeated softly, "Really? What's your favorite?"

"Oh," she shook her head. "I can't pick just one flower. I like them all: roses, tulips, carnations, petunias, pansies, lilies…"

Yes! Discord celebrated in his head. *Good call, Rarity!*

"Do you have a garden?" he inquired.

"No," Fluttershy said, looking crestfallen. "I'd *like* one though, but we don't have much earth around our home. Auntie Starlight lets me keep a few potted plants in my room."

"Perhaps you would like some of these lilies to take home?" Discord said, gesturing to the vases along the wall.

"Oh, that's very…" she blinked in confusion at the word that came to mind, " *kind* of you."

Spike returned again and asked, "Finished?"

"Oh, yes," Fluttershy said, handing Spike her empty bowl.

"Ready for the second course? You're not allergic to anything, are you?"

"No. I mean yes. I mean…yes, I'm ready and no, I don't have any allergies."

"Perfect! Makes things easier for us!"

He left with her plate and this time, Fluttershy did not feel as uncomfortable to be alone with Discord as before. She wasn't sure why, maybe because they had sat together for almost half an hour

now and he hadn't attacked her yet. The idea of casual conversation didn't seem to bother her as much either. In fact, her natural curiosity for all creatures was taking control of her.

"So…what else can you turn into?"

Discord smiled, thrilled that she was leading the conversation now. "I can turn into a goat, an eagle, a snake, and a pegasus if I will it. Everything else, you've seen."

"What…what can the others turn into?"

"Oh." He frowned slightly. "I don't want to scare you."

"Tell me. P-Please. I want to know."

He glanced around and leaned forward. "What they can turn into is a sort of mix between a pony and a bat."

Her eyes widened as she suddenly understood why Twilight and Rarity had slits in the sides of their dresses.

"They quite enjoy it," Discord said with a chuckle. "You know, a short time after Pinkie's first transformation, she started giving herself and the others funny bat names."

"Pinkie?"

"That's right. You haven't met Pinkie Pie yet. She's in the kitchen helping Applejack. Anyway, she decided her 'bat name' would be *Drinkie* Pie, Rainbow Dash would be Rainbow *Bite* , Applejack would be Apple *drac* , and Rarity," he snorted, " *Norsfu* -Rarity!"

He burst into laughter suddenly. "And get this! After Twilight joined up, Pinkie started calling her Twilight," he scoffed, " *Sparkling* !"

He banged his fist on the table and wiped away a bloody tear before she could see. Fluttershy blinked.

"I don't get it."

He frowned. "Well, it's, uh, funnier when Pinkie Pie says it."

He buried his face in his paw and claw in embarrassment, an action which made Fluttershy giggle. He peered at her through his fingers. Her laughter was like a tinkling bell: so soft, yet so resonant. Was there anything this mare could do that *wasn't* enchanting?

Spike returned with the next course: an apple salad tossed with almonds and croutons. This time, Fluttershy didn't hesitate to try it. The dragon was happy to see that she liked this dish too and withdrew into the kitchen.

"So," Fluttershy said to Discord, "what other sort of…powers do you have?"

Meanwhile, in the kitchen, Rarity met Spike with excitement.

"How are they getting on?" she asked eagerly.

"Really well, I think!" he replied. "I've never seen the Master smile so much! Oh, and she likes your salad, AJ."

Applejack nodded, not looking at him as she took the salad bowl from the cart.

"What's she like?" Pinkie asked as she took a yellow cake out of the oven. "I haven't gotten a chance to see her yet!"

"She's really nice," said Spike. "And pretty. *And* she likes dragons!"

"Does she now?" Applejack murmured, glancing at him disapprovingly.

"I mean she was a little squeamish at first, but now she and the Master are talking like old friends!"

"Ooh, no doubt there will be wedding bells soon!" Rarity squealed. "I can't wait to make the wedding dress!"

"I've always wanted to make a fifty-layer wedding cake!" Pinkie exclaimed as she started frosting the yellow cake.

"We're not going to be wearing bridesmaid dresses, are we?" Rainbow groaned as she wiped one of the counters clean.

"Think they'll exchange rings?" Spike wondered as he helped himself to the leftover salad. "I mean I know vampire weddings are different from regular weddings, but it'd be cool to be the ring bearer."

"Well she *has* to have a dress!" Rarity insisted. "And of course a lovely bouquet. Has he asked about the lilies yet? I *do* hope she likes them! Or maybe she could have some white roses. Ooh! We could make a whole wedding arch of white…"

Applejack snapped around and shouted, "WOULD Y'ALL HUSH UP ABOUT WEDDINGS?!"

Everyone recoiled at her sudden outburst, staring at her in fear. Applejack sighed and returned to the dishes.

"Applejack has a point," Twilight said. "They're only just starting to get to know each other and we're already talking about a wedding."

"It might not even happen," Applejack murmured.

"Whatever do you mean?" Rarity inquired. "They're destined for each other."

"Master Discord may have that inclination, but that doesn't guarantee she's gonna agree to be his mate. Mortals don't have the same instincts, ya know?"

Pinkie huffed. "Must you always be a spoilsport, AJ?"

"I'm just being realistic. Y'all should too."

There was a long silence as everyone stared at the orange mare. Spike then cleared his throat.

"I'm gonna go see if Fluttershy's ready for dessert."

"Hold on!" Pinkie cried, carefully placing strawberries on the cake. "Give me a few minutes!"

When Spike reentered the dining room, he was surprised to hear laughter not just from his master, but from their guest.

"And that's not all!" Discord exclaimed. "When I went to look for them again, they were on the *ceiling* !"

Fluttershy laughed even harder with him. "Oh my! Did you ever catch them?"

"Of course. They're on my head now, aren't they? Now I know never to part with my horns again!"

Spike smiled as he walked up to the giggling mare. "You done, domnişoară?"

"Oh, yes, here you go," Fluttershy said as she handed Spike her empty salad bowl. "Tell your chef it was most delicious. Will there be dessert?"

"How do you feel about strawberry yellow cake?"

"Oh, that sounds delightful!"

"Okay. It'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Enjoying yourself?" Discord asked as Spike left again.

Fluttershy blushed and looked down at her hooves. "Y-Yes, I… suppose."

He laughed nervously as a sudden thought occurred to him. "I'm probably not much company. After all, you must dine with all sorts of important ponies all the time."

Her smile faded. "Oh. Yes, sometimes. But I…" she turned away, feeling silly for saying this. "I've never had this much fun before."

Discord lit up, his wings fluttering with excitement.

"I…I must ask though," Fluttershy stammered, looking up at him questioningly. "Why…why did you invite me here?"

His wings drooped and he suddenly felt sweaty again, despite his inability to secrete water.

"Oh. I…" He gulped. "You see…" He tugged on his collar, trying to fan away the heat. "The thing is…" One look in her eyes and his mind went blank. "What was the question?"

Fluttershy tilted her head at his behavior. "I…I just wanted to know… why you invited me here."

He was saved by the opening of the kitchen door. This time, it was Pinkie Pie who was pushing the cart.

"Cake time, every pony!" she exclaimed, darting her eyes at Fluttershy. "Hi! I'm Pinkie Pie! I know Spike's supposed to serve dessert, but I just *had* to see you up close!"

Fluttershy shrieked as the pink mare stuck her face in hers.

"Wow! You *are* pretty! The Master wasn't kidding!"

"Pinkie!" Discord coughed, hiding his face behind his claw.

"Now," Pinkie said, pulling away and posing in front of the cart, "time for the crème de la crème de la crème! A delectable, delicious, yellow cake with a strawberry filling and vanilla icing! Baked it myself!"

"It looks wonderful," Fluttershy said, gazing at the small, frosted white cake with juicy strawberries on top.

"Yeah," Pinkie said with a longing sigh. "Wish I could eat it myself, but you know. If it has no plasma, can't digest it!"

"Pinkie!" Discord whispered sharply, making a slashing motion across his throat.

"You just *had* a drink, Master, you don't need to slit any throats tonight!"

Discord buried his face in his hands while Fluttershy's face turned white.

"Oh, don't worry," Pinkie snorted. "He doesn't actually *slit* any throats. He just sinks his teeth into…"

"Okay, Pinkie!" Spike cried, hastily running up to the cart. "I'll cut the cake, if you don't mind!"

"Aw, come on, Spike! I was just telling Fluttershy about how we drink…"

"I think the others need help cleaning up!"

He hastened to push the pink pony back into the kitchen.

"But it's *really* quite cool once you get past all the blood…"

The dragon shut the door to silence her. "Don't mind her! She's very…eccentric." He clasped his claws together. "Now how about that cake?"

The next few minutes were filled with more awkward silence as Fluttershy slowly ate her slice of cake. Pinkie's words had reminded her of her situation. Sure, these vampires seemed nice enough, but how could she be sure she could trust them?

"You didn't answer my question earlier," Fluttershy muttered, looking up at Discord. "Why did you invite me?"

He hesitated, and the words left his lips before he could contain himself. "You're very beautiful."

She sighed. "Yes. You've said that."

He frowned at her passiveness. "You don't believe me?"

"It's not that I don't believe you, it's just…is that the only reason?"

He bit his lip. "W-What other reason would there be?"

She put down her fork and bravely sat up. "I hate to be frank, but… you *are* a vampire."

He stared at her and then chuckled. "I didn't invite you to *be* dinner, if that's what you're thinking." His smile disappeared when she didn't laugh along with him. "Oh. No wonder you've been tense all evening! I can assure you, my dear. We may be vampires, but we

don't drink *ponies* ."

She crossed her hooves. "You were going to drink *me* , and those thieves."

"Yes, well, we only do it on those rare occasions, like when we've been discovered or are defending ourselves, but we certainly don't do it for *fun* ."

"Why did you spare *me* then? And why am I here now?"

He tensed all over as he could feel her scrutinizing stare. He was so close to spilling the beans.

"I…um…"

Once again, he was saved by the kitchen door.

"Finished?" Spike asked. "Or do you want seconds?"

"No, thank you," Fluttershy replied giving the dragon the last of her dishes. "I'm full."

"Well!" Discord exclaimed, standing up from his seat. "Since the evening is still young, how about I give you a tour of my castle, domnişoară?"

Fluttershy's guard was up again as her imagination worked on where exactly he would be leading her. A dungeon? A slaughterhouse? His bedroom? All those ideas gave her chills.

"S-Sure," she stammered, "but…only if Spike comes with us."

She felt safer with the only non-blood drinker in the vicinity. Discord was slightly disappointed with this request, but he understood her reasoning.

"Very well," Discord said, turning to his dragon. "Once you've cleared the table, Spike, you may join me and Lady Fluttershy."

Once that was settled, Discord led them back into the main foyer.

"You've been here already," he said. "Not much, but then again, entrance halls are just for entering."

He snapped his fingers and opened a pair of double doors to another room. Fluttershy gasped at the sight of a glittering, golden room. It was vast with a high ceiling, from which a crystal chandelier hung. The only items in the room were a grand piano, a harp, a violin and music stands.

"This is the ballroom," Discord announced.

"You host balls here?" Fluttershy questioned in surprise

"No, but Pinkie Pie likes to throw the occasional party to liven the place up a bit, so we have this room for such occasions."

He closed the doors and started up the staircase.

"Careful," he warned, "these steps were polished earlier today. They might still be a bit slippery."

As he said this, Fluttershy's front hoof slipped out from underneath. Discord held out his paw and she hesitated to take it. After a glimpse at his insistent eyes, she slowly placed her hoof in his paw. Discord smiled as he helped her up the steps, elated that she was allowing him to touch her at last. Her hoof was so small, so delicate. He worried if he held it too tight it would crumble in his grasp.

He started with the West Wing, as that's where the more interesting rooms were. The first door to the right revealed a large room with punching bags, dumbbells and wooden rings and ropes hanging from the ceiling.

"This is the gymnasium," Discord explained. "Rainbow Dash insisted we have one. She likes to stay fit, you know." A thought occurred to him and he flexed his arms. "And, uh…so do I!"

Spike smacked himself in the forehead, while Fluttershy just smiled politely. Discord then opened the door to the next room, which was filled with various cloths and sewing equipment.

"Rarity's sewing room," he said. "Of course, I can just make clothes

out of thin air, but she prefers to make them herself. Better than sitting around all night, I suppose."

The next room was filled with musical instruments, which made Fluttershy's eyes widen in interest.

"If you haven't guessed," Discord smirked, "this is the music room."

She looked up at him in surprise. "You play all these instruments?"

"Oh, no! We all share these. That guitar over there is Rainbow's. Applejack plays the bass, as well as the banjo. Pinkie…well, there's not really anything she *can't* play. Spike, Rarity and I all play the piano."

He looked down at her and saw the wonder in her gaze.

"Would you, uh, like me to demonstrate?"

"Oh," Fluttershy said in a cracked voice, as she had not been expecting this. "That would be, uh…sure."

Discord clasped his hands together and proceeded to the glorious instrument. He seated himself on the bench, stretched out his fingers and glanced excitedly at Fluttershy. Then he lowered his fingers and began playing a slow, peaceful tune.

Fluttershy was immediately entranced, not just by the beautiful melody, but the creature playing it. It was so strange, seeing such a horrifying, mismatched monster play something so alluring and harmonious. His fingers flew gracefully across the keyboard, his eyes focused intently on the notes he was playing. He didn't even have music in front of him.

She found herself coming towards him, her fear melting further with every step. Before she knew it, she was seated on the bench beside him. He glanced down at her in surprise and smiled. Spike, deciding that he wasn't needed anymore, slowly backed out of the room and gently closed the door.

"You…play beautifully," Fluttershy softly complimented.

"Thank you," Discord said, trying so hard not to cry from happiness. "I've had centuries of practice."

She looked up at him in bewilderment. "Centuries?"

"Vampires are immortal, you know? Gives us plenty of free time."

Fluttershy cleared her throat and attempted to change the subject. "I know this song. It's 'Moonlight Sonata' by Beethooven, right?"

"Why, yes!" he replied, greatly impressed. "Do you play?"

"Oh, um, no." She looked away in shame. "Aunt Starlight doesn't think it…appropriate for a lady to play an instrument." She sighed. "That's a job for stallions."

Discord's playing slowed as he looked at the mare with sympathy. "I…can always teach you."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose…"

"No, really! I've taught Rarity and Spike."

"Well…maybe."

They said nothing for a few minutes as he continued playing. There were no words to express how jubilant he was feeling. The fact that she was sitting so close to him, that she was taking interest in his music, that they were enjoying each other's company: it was enough to warm his un-beating heart.

"How do you like my castle, Fluttershy?"

"Oh, it's very grand," she replied, "though a little…dreary."

"Well, when you come to live here, you can decorate it however you want."

Her face paled and her eyes widened in alarm. "When I come to *what* ?!"

Discord's fingers froze and his smile vanished as he processed what

he had just said.

"No!" he cried desperately, facing her. "I didn't…"

She stood up and began backing away in fear. "I knew it! You *are* planning to suck my blood!"

"Fluttershy, no, that's not what I…"

She raced to the door. Discord hastily snapped his fingers. When she tried the door, it wouldn't budge. She turned to him, now absolutely horrified.

"Just let me explain," he tried to say, coming towards her with open arms.

" *That's* why you brought me here!" she screamed, pressing her back against the door. "You're going to turn me into a vampire like you did all the others!"

"You don't understand…"

"You're going to make me one of your minions! Your…your slave!"

"No!" he shouted, placing his hands on either side of her head to prevent her from escaping. "I would *never* do that to you!"

"Then *why* ?! Why are you doing all this?!"

The look she was giving him was painful. He didn't want her to fear him, but he also couldn't reveal the truth. That might frighten her even more. But he also didn't want her thinking he was going to turn her into his slave. She deserved the truth. She had to know how important she was to him.

He winced as he stammered, "Y-Yes, I… *do* intend to…eventually… make you a vampire…"

She reached for the doorknob again.

"But!" he cried, holding up a finger. "I *don't* wish to make you a mere servant—they are *not* my slaves! Instead, I wish to…to…"

He murmured the rest under his breath.

"What?" Fluttershy said, not hearing him.

He looked up at her with pleading eyes as he finished, "…to make you my wife."

He waited for her to scream, kick him, push him, attempt to break down the door. But she only stood there, staring, all the breath absent from her body. It was a long while before she had the courage to speak.

"Your…your *wife* ?!"

He took a deep breath before responding. "Yes, Fluttershy. *That's* the reason I stopped myself from drinking your blood in the woods, and why I saved you last night, and why I invited you here tonight."

"So…all this was to… *court* me?"

"Yes. Yes, I…wanted us to get to know each other, for us to maybe…love each other."

Her eyes widened further.

"Fluttershy, I…I'm in love with you."

She froze completely, unsure of how to respond. How *could* she respond? A blood-sucking, possibly murderous vampire was practically proposing to her! She didn't know what to think, it was all happening so fast. She turned around and tried the door again.

"Fluttershy, please…" Discord pleaded.

"Let me out!" she screamed.

"You have to understand, we're…we're *destined* for each other!"

"Let me out! Now!"

"Fluttershy, if you'd just let me…"

He tried to touch her but quickly retracted his claw. Meanwhile,

Spike was standing outside, wondering why there was pounding on the door.

"Help!" Fluttershy's voice cried. "Some pony, help me!"

Thinking Discord had perhaps lost control, Spike hastily took his skeleton key out of his pocket and twisted it in the lock. Fluttershy bolted out as soon as the door was open and raced down the hall.

"Fluttershy, wait!" Discord called.

"What's going on?" Spike inquired.

"I told her I wanted to marry her and…"

"You did *what* ?!"

"Well, don't just stand there, stop her!" He flew after her and spotted her rushing down the stairs. "Some pony, stop her! Stop her!"

Pinkie was the one who responded to his call and whizzed in front of Fluttershy, hovering between her and the hallway leading to the front door.

"Hey, where's the fire?"

Fluttershy shrieked as she looked up at the transformed earth pony. Pinkie's fur had grown rougher and dirtier, her ears had become pointed, her eyes from bright blue to blood red, two sharp fangs hung from her mouth, but the most notable aspect of her was the enormous bat wings at her sides.

"Pinkie!" Discord cried, slapping his paw to his forehead.

Pinkie looked down at herself. "Oops."

The other mares rushed into the room and gasped at the scene.

"Uh-oh," Rainbow uttered. "Busted."

"Please!" Fluttershy begged, backing away from all of them. "Spare me! I…I won't tell any pony!"

"Calm down, domnişoara," Twilight said assuredly, taking cautious steps toward her. "I know we may seem untrustworthy, but we truly mean you no harm."

"Don't give me that! You want to make me one of your own, you want to make me his… *his* bride!"

She pointed up at Discord. The vampire maidens turned to him in shock.

"You *told* her?!" Rarity demanded.

"Please, Fluttershy!" Discord shouted, ignoring the others as he slid down the barrister. "I know I'm a monster, I know I'm not what you would imagine in a husband, and yes, I've done many things that would disgust you, but you must believe me when I say that I lo—"

"Don't say it!" Fluttershy snapped. "Turn me into a vampire, drink all my blood if you must, but I will never, *never* be your wife! How… *how* could I ever marry a…a *monster* ?!"

He stepped back with a hurt expression on his face. Her harsh words, her hateful gaze, were all so penetrating. After a while, he hung his head, turned around and flew up the stairs without saying a word.

Fluttershy let out the air she had been holding in and stormed toward the exit.

"You're not going out into the forest alone, are you?" Twilight asked.

"Leave me alone," Fluttershy muttered.

"But it's dangerous out there, especially at night!"

"You're not going to make me change my mind!"

"Please!"

The lavender unicorn was suddenly at Fluttershy's side, her hoof on her shoulder.

"The least we can do is take you home. We have a carriage."

"No, thank you!" Fluttershy shrieked, jerking away. "I'm not going anywhere with you!"

"We will *not* drink your blood, we *promise* ."

She looked at the mares. Pinkie had turned back into an earth pony and was staring at her with pleading eyes, as were everyone else, except Applejack, who seemed to be glaring at her. Fluttershy turned back to Twilight.

"Alright, but only if Spike comes with me."

The unicorn nodded. "Spike, Rainbow, Applejack, accompany Lady Fluttershy home, would you?"

The dragon and the two mares went immediately to Fluttershy's sides and led her out.

"Well," Pinkie piped. "That could've gone better."

It feels like I'm writing anti-"Bride of Discord." I mean similar premise, but without the imprisonment and the Mane 6 actually approve of the relationship EXCEPT Applejack. Weird how it turned out that way, huh?

In case you didn't know, the Mane 6 vampire names are from the "Night of the Apples" comic saga.

The Vagabond

Decided to work on this for National Novel Writing Month (50K words in the month of November)! So far, so good.

Discord kept a black carriage should he and the others ever need to make a quick getaway. While they all, of course, could fly, that was not the case in the daytime, and Discord would have to remain within the darkness of the carriage to prevent himself from burning up.

Fluttershy did not want to look at the dark forest, but closing the black curtains would shut her and Spike in complete darkness, so she left them open. Applejack and Rainbow Dash were pulling the carriage, both silent, which allowed Fluttershy to think over what had just occurred.

Discord had revealed his intentions to make her his wife and confessed his love for her, if that's what one could truly call it. She had had no choice but to run. He *was* a blood-sucking vampire after all, and how could she agree to marry him after knowing him for such a short time? When she had realized Count Discord and the vampire that had been following her were one in the same, she had been so terrified and confused that marriage had been the last thing on her mind.

What would it mean to be a vampire's wife? It would mean becoming a vampire as well. Discord had confirmed that vampires were immortal, so marrying him wouldn't be just "until death, do they part," but for eternity. Vampires also survived on the blood of mortals. Even if Discord had been truthful about them not feeding on ponies, that would mean she would have to feed on other animals, and she could not bear that thought.

And what about the Count himself? His horrible diet aside, she hardly knew anything about him. Sure, they had managed to carry on a conversation tonight, but could she trust him? Did he mean it

when he said he was in love with her? If so, it was only because he thought she was beautiful, for that was all he had said about her. Perhaps it was harsh to call him a monster, but what else could she have done in that situation?

"He's not that bad, you know."

Fluttershy glanced at Spike, but did not respond.

"No, really," he continued. "He's not as murderous and bloodthirsty as you may think."

"Yeah!" Rainbow called from the front. "Just because we're vampires doesn't mean we don't have principles! We've never tasted pony blood in our lives!" She paused. "Most of us, anyway."

"And the Master really does want to marry you. He can't help it if he's in love with you."

"I don't understand how you can talk that way about him," Fluttershy said coldly. "I mean he took away your lives and you call him Master. Does he even pay you? You're practically his slaves!"

"Whoa, whoa there!" Rainbow exclaimed, pulling the carriage to a halt. "What gave you that idea? And what gives you the right to talk about the Master that way?"

Fluttershy poked her head out the window to look at her. "Surely none of you *wanted* to be vampires."

"Actually," Rainbow said as she and Applejack continued onward, "that's exactly what happened. Master Discord didn't force himself upon us. It was our choice. Well, except for Rarity and Applejack. They were…"

"We were bitten by another vampire," Applejack said gruffly, shooting her friend a warning glare. "Let's just leave it at that."

"But why would any of you *want* to be vampires?" Fluttershy asked. "Why would you want to become blood-drinking mon—?"

She stopped herself, deciding it was best not to say it again.

"In short, it stinks to be a mare in this day and age," Rainbow explained. "No matter where you're from, no matter what your background, it's always the same damn thing." She started speaking in a mocking, high-pitched voice. "'A mare must be *dainty* ! A mare must be *delicate* ! A mare must wear uncomfortable clothing! A mare should get married and have lots and lots of foals! Celestia forbid they should try and make something of themselves!'"

She turned her head back to Fluttershy. "Get the gist?"

Fluttershy nodded, as she had gotten a similar lecture from her aunt numerous times.

"That's the kind of life I had," Rainbow continued, "growing up in a Romane caravan."

"Romane?"

"You know us better as 'gypsies,'" Rainbow growled, "but that's *not* our proper name. But yes, my mother was a dancer and my father played the flute. My whole life, we traveled in a caravan with some other Romanes. It was exciting, going from place to place, seeing new things. My mother taught me to dance and I learned guitar so I could help bring in more bits."

"So you got to see the whole world?" Fluttershy asked in wonder.

"Yeah." She hung her head. "Then I turned thirteen, and Father figured it was high time I got married."

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "At *thirteen* ?!"

"I know, I was late. There was this Romane stallion who had become rich enough to build an enormous mansion. We went to perform there one day. Before I knew it, he and Father were negotiating a bride price! Did I mention the guy was forty? Of course, I *had* to get out of there! I grabbed whatever food and bits I could and flew as fast as my wings could carry me!

"Unfortunately, I hadn't really thought my plan through. Being on my own meant I had to provide for myself, but I couldn't get a job, because no pony would take a thirteen-year-old filly, especially

when she's Romane. I even tried joining the army, then the Wonderbolts, but you can guess how *that* went. I had to rely on my dance and guitar skills to put bread on the table. You know, if I *had* a table. But it wasn't enough to put a roof over my head, so I pretty much became a vagabond.

"It was like this for four years. Then one night, about ninety-something years ago, as I was flying over these woods, I caught sight of the most bizarre creature I had ever seen, hunched over the bloody corpse of a…"

She glanced at Fluttershy's horrified face and stopped herself. "Anyway, I was so shocked from what I was seeing that I wasn't thinking. Then the creature looked up and saw me. I flew for my life, but he was fast, faster than anything I had ever seen! I would've been in awe had I not been pinned under him. He said I had seen too much and unless I wanted to suffer from severe memory loss, I was not leaving the forest alive.

"It didn't take long for me to figure out what he was. We Romanes are pretty much experts when it comes to the supernatural—we see some crazy stuff in our travels. So I said, 'Wait, if you're a vampire, does that mean you can turn *me* into a vampire and give me super cool powers like super strength and super speed?' He was confused at how excited I was, but he said yes. So I asked him to change me."

" *Begged* him, more like it," Applejacks snorted.

"Shut up, AJ! It's not like there was any point in continuing my so-called life! In this form, I don't have to marry some creep and stay home knitting all day! I can do whatever I want! And if any pony tries to stop me…well, let's just say it wouldn't be a nice day for them."

Rainbow looked back at Fluttershy. "You can guess who that vampire was."

"So," the yellow pegasus responded, "if you hadn't asked the Count to bite you…he would've *killed* you?!"

"No, no, no! Weren't you listening? He was just going to erase my

memory!"

"He wasn't going to do that with *me* ! He said he was going to either kill me or change me!"

"He was probably just cranky 'cuz he hadn't eaten, but Master only feeds on ponies when absolutely necessary. Frankly, I'm glad I met him. He was the first male to treat me like an equal, not some stupid mare. After my transformation, he said I could go anywhere I pleased, but I decided to stay, because by taking my life, he had practically *saved* it, and I felt indebted to him."

"Why should you feel like you owe him something?"

"That's what loyalty is, being devoted to some pony without expecting anything in return."

Fluttershy tried to get a look at the earth pony. "What about you, Applejack?"

"Discord saved my life too," Applejack murmured, "but he also took away my death."

From the ominous tone in her voice, Fluttershy decided not to ask further. She withdrew her head back into the carriage and turned to Spike.

"I can't marry him," she said softly. "You understand that, don't you?"

The dragon nodded. "He wasn't supposed to tell you tonight. I guess he couldn't hold it in."

"I think ya made the right choice," called Applejack.

"AJ!" Rainbow hissed, nudging her in the side.

"I *do* ! Being a vampire may seem like a step up for you, Rainbow, with all ya have to gain, but don't forget the things you've *lost* !"

"Ugh, not *this* again! Look, we're all sorry for what happened to you, but you don't have to bite our heads off just because you were r—"

"SHUT UP!"

The carriage jolted as Applejack pushed sideways into Rainbow Dash. Fluttershy let out a shriek as she jumped in her seat.

"Okay, okay!" Rainbow shouted. " *Sorry* !"

Spike looked apologetically at Fluttershy.

"Sorry about that," he whispered. "AJ's very sensitive about how she was bitten. You see, she was…"

"I can hear ya, Spike!" Applejack called.

"Darn it! I always forget you guys have super hearing!"

"That's okay," Fluttershy assured him. "I'd rather not know."

"You know something, Fluttershy?" Rainbow said. "I don't entirely blame you for reacting that way to the Master's proposal either. After all, no pony likes to be pressured into marrying some pony they don't love, let alone a complete stranger."

"Thank you."

"But you know he's not gonna give up, right? He's crazy about you. And we all know you're eventually going to…"

"Hush!" Applejack hissed.

"Right. But he's a really nice guy, once you get to know him!"

"And we may be his servants, in a way," said Spike, "but he treats us well."

" *And* he brings us food when we need it."

Fluttershy shuddered at the image of Discord dragging the corpse of a poor animal into the castle and the vampire maidens hungrily flocking to it with their sharp fangs ready.

She said nothing else the rest of the trip home. She would give the vampires one thing: they were true to their word. Spike opened the

carriage door, jumped out and offered Fluttershy his claw with a bow.

"Thank you," she said softly.

"Goodnight, Domnişoară Fluttershy," Spike said, climbing back into the carriage. "We're sorry if we upset you this evening."

"Oh no, *you* didn't upset me."

"Nevertheless, we offer our humblest apologies, and hope to see you again sometime."

"Oh," Fluttershy said, looking down at her hooves. "I…don't think that will be possible."

Spike sighed. "Fair enough. But really, domnişoară. As terrifying as our master is, you should consider giving him a chance."

And with that, he closed the door and the carriage was off. Once they were out of sight, Fluttershy went up to her mansion and knocked on the door. Coco Pommel was the one who answered it.

"My lady!" she exclaimed. "We were getting worried!"

"Is that my niece?!" Starlight called as she stormed down the hallway. "Fluttershy! I'm writing to that count first thing in the morning, telling him he should hire a more courteous staff! Imagine! Shutting me out! *Me* ! Why, next time we're over there…"

"There isn't going to be a next time, Auntie," Fluttershy muttered.

Her aunt stared at her. "What do you mean? What did you do?!"

"I didn't! I mean…"

She hesitated. How was she going to convince her aunt not to let her see the Count again without revealing that he was a vampire?

"He, um…he…he didn't like me!"

Starlight blinked. "Didn't *like* you? Now how can that be?"

"He, um…thought I was…he didn't think I was pretty enough!"

There was a long pause and Fluttershy waited for her aunt to accept the fib. Finally, Starlight put her hoof to her head.

"I *knew* we shouldn't have put your hair up! But did he actually tell you this to your *face* ?"

"Y-Yes."

"How rude! Now I know where his maid gets it!"

"Sorry, Auntie. I tried my best."

"Oh, no, darling, that brute was the one who…" Starlight paused when she caught sight of Fluttershy's neck. "What is *that* ?"

Fluttershy glanced down at the butterfly pendant. She had forgotten she was wearing it.

"Oh, uh, Count Discord gave it to me."

Starlight raised an eyebrow. "If he didn't like you, why did he give you a necklace?"

Fluttershy blushed. "It was, uh…"

"And wait a moment! Where's the necklace you wore earlier?"

Fluttershy had forgotten about that too. So had Rarity, apparently. She was about to explain when her aunt let out a furious grunt.

"You mean to tell me he replaced an expensive, one-of-a-kind emerald necklace with this…this *lesser* one and kept the first for himself?!"

"Um…"

"Not only ill-mannered, but also a thief! Tomorrow morning, I'm giving that brute a piece of my mind! 'Not pretty enough,' indeed! Don't worry, Fluttershy. You will not be seeing *that* scum again!"

"Thank you," Fluttershy sighed in relief. "I mean…oh, what a

shame."

Twilight, Pinkie and Rarity were standing outside their master's room, listening to the soft sobs echoing within.

"Shouldn't we go in there?" Pinkie wondered aloud.

"Let's give him a few minutes," Twilight replied.

Rarity looked sharply at Pinkie. "You *had* to show off your bat form, didn't you?!"

"You're blaming *me* ?!" Pinkie exclaimed, placing her hoof dramatically to her chest. " *He's* the one who decided to talk about marriage on the first date!"

"Let's not start pointing hooves at each other," Twilight said carefully. "What happened tonight is no pony's fault."

"So it's Spike's fault, then?"

"No *one's* fault. We just weren't ready for this, neither was Fluttershy."

"You're right," Rarity heaved. "Perhaps we should've just started with a casual tea."

They heard hoofsteps and turned to see Applejack, Rainbow Dash and Spike coming up the stairs.

"How's the old guy doing?" Rainbow asked.

On the other side of the door, the sobs grew louder.

"Does that answer your question?" Rarity replied.

"Poor guy," Spike said. "We should try and cheer him up."

"Agreed!" Pinkie piped. "I'll go get the sock puppets!"

"No, everyone," Twilight said. "We have to give him some space."

"Suppose he hurts himself in there?" Applejack questioned.

"He's immortal, remember? The only way he could possibly hurt himself at night is if he had a wooden stake or garlic lying around."

Everyone jumped as they heard a loud bang which repeated over and over again. It sounded like someone banging on piano keys.

"Okay," Twilight said, biting her lip. " *Now* we should probably go in there."

She opened the door with her magic to find Discord at the piano on the wall, banging his head against the keyboard, his cheeks stained with blood.

"Master?" Twilight called.

Discord groaned as he brought his head down once again without raising it back up. "She hates me."

"She doesn't *hate* you, Master!" Pinkie piped. "She just…got a little spooked!"

"Even worse. She's afraid of me."

"Now, now, Master," Rarity assured him, though her voice was shaky. "She's not afraid of *you* specifically…"

"She's just scared of marrying you, that's all!" Pinkie blurted.

Everyone glared at her, making her shrink back in shame.

"Cheer up, Master," Rainbow said. "Just because tonight didn't work out, doesn't mean you should give up on her."

"Yeah," said Spike. "She just needs a little time."

"You kind of took her by surprise with that proposal, but she'll forget about it in a few…"

"What would be the point?" Discord lamented as he leaned back and dangled from the piano bench. "She's never going to love me."

"But she's your *mate* , Master," Twilight insisted. "Fate has decreed that you two…"

"We have nothing in common!"

"That's not true!" Spike exclaimed. "She liked it when you played piano, and you got along well at dinner!"

"And you don't need to be exactly alike to be in love," said Rarity.

Discord twisted his whole body around so he could shout at them right-side up: "She's an *animal lover* ! I *drink* animals' blood! And have you *seen* her! She's an *angel* ! And I'm," he paused to look down at himself, "everything she's not."

"You're not *that* ugly!" Pinkie snorted.

"What Pinkie Pie *means* ," Rarity said, glaring sideways at the pink pony, "is that you don't have to be good-looking to win her heart."

"I'm not just talking about my looks," Discord muttered sadly. "She's sweet, and kind, and like I said, an *angel* . I've *killed* millions of animals *and* ponies! Why would Fate pair me up with some pony so far out of reach? Even if she *did* agree to be mine, can you imagine that gentle soul becoming…one of us?"

No one said anything. Discord let out a sorrowful sigh.

"When the sun comes up tomorrow…I'm going out."

Everyone gasped and rushed up to him.

"No, Master, you can't!" Rainbow pleaded.

"You'll burn to a crisp!" Rarity shrieked

"Don't leave us!" Pinkie begged.

"We need you here!" Twilight exclaimed.

"Don't lose hope!" Spike yelled.

"She's just a mare!" Applejack shouted. "She's not worth dying for!"

"If the mare I'm destined to be with doesn't want me," Discord growled as he slunk to the floor, "what *is* there to live for?!"

" *Us* !" Pinkie whined, wrapping her hooves around his neck. "We love you, Master! We don't want you to go!"

"You've been so good to us!" Rainbow insisted, kneeling down to him. "We owe everything to you!"

"And don't say you ruined our lives!" Rarity exclaimed, stroking his head. "Because you *saved* us!"

"As much as I regret having to leave my old life," Applejack said softly, " *I* don't want ya to go either."

"Don't give up, Master!" Spike begged.

"You might still have a chance with that mare," said Twilight. "Just let us try to bring her back before trying anything drastic!"

Discord looked up at the pleading faces of his devoted friends. They had all stood by him for such a long time, some of them for years. Even though it was his fault most of them were there in the first place, they had never held it against him. He really didn't know what he had done to deserve such loyalty.

He finally sighed and sat up. "Okay. I won't give up *just yet* , but I need a moment alone now, if you don't mind."

"Of course," Twilight nodded as they began filing out of the room. "Get some rest, Master. It's been a long night."

She waited until he was tucked away in his coffin before closing the door.

"What should we do now?" Pinkie asked as they trotted down the stairs.

"We *need* to get Fluttershy back," Rarity replied, "and convince her that the Master is *not* a monster like she said. I know he was rushing things, but *really* !"

"We tried doing that on the carriage ride to her house," Spike explained. "I think it calmed her down a little, but I'm not sure she's there yet."

"She seemed pretty interested in my story though," said Rainbow. "I was telling her how I'd escaped from an arranged marriage and how I was getting nowhere as a mare until I met Discord and…"

"Hold on," Twilight said, stopping in her tracks. "That's it! If we tell Fluttershy why we were all bitten, and that we stay here on our own accord, she'll see the Master in a new light!"

"You mean we *all* tell her our life stories?" Pinkie asked.

"Yes. We'll all go one at a time. It might be too overwhelming if we all show up at once."

"Ooh! Can I go first?"

"Maybe *you* should go first, Twilight," Spike suggested. "You're the voice of reason. You could prepare her."

"I should save mine for last," Rarity cringed. "It's not a pretty tale."

"And she's already heard mine," said Rainbow.

"Applejack?" Twilight asked.

"No."

They all turned to the orange mare, who had a grave expression on her face.

"No," she repeated sternly. "I am *not* telling her what happened to me."

"Come on, AJ," Rainbow urged. "You've *got* to."

"We've gotta get Fluttershy and the Master together!" Pinkie exclaimed.

"That's just *it* !" Applejack snapped. "I don't *wanna* help! Y'all can do

what ya want, but I want no part of it!" She paused. "Then again, maybe I *should* tell her what happened to me! It'll make her see just why she *shouldn't* be a vampire!"

She stomped off to her room, not looking back at the others as she slammed the door behind her.

"Poor dear," said Rarity. "I often forget she had it worse than any of us."

"She'll come around," said Twilight. "For now, let's just do what we can to get the Master back with his mate, or else, I'm afraid of what he's going to do if we don't."

Yeah, the underage marriages...still a thing in some Romani communities.

The Investigator

The next few chapters are going to be slow, but important.

Coco Pommel shrieked when she found a mare with blood-red eyes and a small dragon standing outside the front door.

"Good morning, domnişoară," Twilight greeted politely. "Is Lady Fluttershy at home?"

The maid was frozen stiff, her eyes flitting from the unicorn's eyes to the dragon.

"To…to whom do we owe the pleasure?"

"We come bringing a message from our master, the Count Discord."

"Oh," Coco laughed nervously. "That explains it." She held out her hoof.

"The Master insisted we give our message in person."

"Oh, I see. Well, in that case, please come…"

"STOP!" Starlight hollered, pushing the maid aside. "Don't let them in!" She glared dangerously at Twilight. " *You* again?! If you've come to apologize for your vulgar behavior last night, you can tell your master I want nothing to do with…" She paused as her eyes momentarily widened at the sight of the dragon.

"We *have* come to apologize," Twilight said carefully, "I, especially. You mustn't be offended for my rudeness, but I was only following orders. The Count likes his privacy, and I had been told to let in only your niece."

Starlight studied her carefully. "Alright, *you're* forgiven, but I *cannot* forgive your master for openly insulting my niece!"

Twilight raised an eyebrow. "Insulted?"

"Yes! 'Not pretty enough for him?!' I never heard such a direct insult in my life!"

"Doamnă, I'm sure you're greatly mistaken. The Master said no such thing to your niece."

"You expect me to take the word of a servant over my own niece?! I don't care what your master says! You are *not* coming in this house!"

Twilight looked to Spike and tilted her head towards the door. The dragon grinned and raced past Starlight.

"Come on in, Twilight!" he shouted.

" *Excuse* me!" Starlight bellowed as Twilight pushed past. "This is *my* house and I will *not* be…"

They ignored her ravings and began searching for Fluttershy, eventually spotting her through the open door to a drawing room, reading quietly in a chair with Angel at her side.

"Lady Fluttershy!" Spike exclaimed.

The pegasus looked up and stood in alarm while Angel recoiled with a growl. Starlight stormed into the room.

"There you are!" she scowled. "If you think you can trespass on my property even though I specifically said you may *not* see my niece, I have no choice but to…"

"It's okay, Auntie," Fluttershy muttered. "I'd like to hear what they have to say."

Starlight stared at her with her mouth agape. Then she glared at Twilight and with a huff, stomped out of the drawing room, slamming the door behind her. Fluttershy gestured for Twilight and Spike to sit in the cushioned chairs across from her. Twilight had changed into a purple, more modest dress and had a yellow headscarf wrapped around her head.

"I know why you're here," Fluttershy said as she patted Angel, calming him down. "You want me to give Count Discord another chance."

Twilight nodded. "We're not going to force you, domnişoară, but we're not going to stop trying."

"Tell your master that sending his servants isn't going to…"

"Our master doesn't know we're here."

Fluttershy paused. "What?"

"He doesn't. It was my idea to come."

The pegasus blinked. "Why? I mean I know he's your master, but why does it matter to all of you whether or not I marry him?"

"First of all, the Master didn't mean to bring up the notion of marriage last night. He *does* intend to eventually marry you, but he knew you wouldn't want to rush into it. As for why we care, Count Discord is more than just our master. He is our friend. Since you ran out last night, he's been in despair." She hung her head. "He even talked about walking out in the sunlight."

Fluttershy's eyes widened. "So…vampires really *can't* go out in the sunlight? How come you're here, then?"

"The girls and I can go out in the sunlight as long as we're in our pony forms. The Master, however, is not a regular vampire like us and will burn in the sun no matter what form he's in."

"Look, I'm sorry if I hurt his feelings, but…why *me* ? I'm nothing special."

"Oh, but you *are* . You see…" Twilight hesitated, contemplating just how much she should reveal to this mare. "Vampires…don't really get to choose their mates. Though I suppose they choose whether or not to pursue that mate, but they fall in love at first sight. Well, most of the time. Sometimes it takes a few minutes longer and the instinct kicks in once the vampire realizes how unique this pony is. Either way, once a vampire falls in love, they can't get that pony out

of their head.

"They start dreaming—vampires don't dream until they find their mate. They feel this obligation to please this pony, to protect them at all costs, to, eventually, become one with them."

Fluttershy was silent for a moment as she took in all this information. "Okay, but…if he's so… *in love* with me, why doesn't he just change me into a vampire?"

"He can't. It would go against our mating laws."

"You have *laws* for this sort of thing?"

"Yes. The laws pretty much enforce the principle that mates are meant to be equals. Because Count Discord is a vampire, he is, by nature, your superior. To balance the scales, he is unable to touch you without your verbal permission, unless you touch him first. Surely you noticed how hesitant he was to touch you last night."

Fluttershy took a moment to think of it. "Y-Yes…but the night we met, he was able to touch me!"

"Because the mating instinct hadn't kicked in yet. Once it did, he couldn't touch you. It's different once both mates are vampires, because they are automatically equals." Twilight looked at Fluttershy pleadingly. "So you see, the Master is devastated that you rejected him. According to him, you're his soulmate."

The pegasus shook her head. "I don't care what he thinks. *I* don't have your…mating instinct. And I can't love someone who feeds on the blood of innocent animals!"

Twilight folded her hooves across her chest. "You're familiar with the nature of the animal food chain, are you?"

"Yes."

"Then you'll know that the herbivores eat plants, the carnivores eat the herbivores and when the carnivores die, they become the earth to feed the plants which the herbivores eat and so on. So you see, we are merely doing our part in the food chain, as we cannot survive

without consuming mortal blood."

She glanced at Angel. "Though for your sake, I think we'd all be willing to take rabbits off our diet."

Angel put up his paws, as if to say, " *Just try, you cur!* "

"Fine, fine," Fluttershy relented, holding Angel back. "Still…the very idea…that I would have to…"

"You wouldn't have to," Twilight interjected. "Discord does most of the hunting for us anyway."

She looked like she was about to weep at the mention of "hunting."

"I don't suppose you can understand how I and the others could accept such a life."

Fluttershy nodded. "Rainbow told me her story last night, but…I still don't…"

Twilight held up her hoof. "You deserve to know all our stories, starting with mine. If you wouldn't mind listening, that is."

"Oh, please. By all means."

"Then I must ask you not to interrupt until I've finished."

Fluttershy leaned back in her chair, made herself comfortable, and held Angel down on her lap to prevent him from escaping.

"I was born and raised in Bullarest," Twilight began. "My father was a scientist, my mother was a journalist. Together, they made a team of private investigators, the finest in all of Bullarest." She chuckled slightly. "They had so many clients, it's a wonder they were able to keep up with them all and raise my brother and me at the same time."

"Hey, don't forget *me* !" Spike scowled.

"Yes, I was just getting to that, Spike. When I was three, my parents stopped a smuggling ring of magical objects. One of these objects

was a dragon egg, which hatched before they could figure out who it belonged to."

"That was me!" Spike said cheerfully.

"Yes," Twilight said with a smile. "He took a liking to Mother and Father immediately, and the feeling was mutual. Since they couldn't be sure who his parents were, they took him home. He became more like a member of the family than a pet. Spike's been my best friend ever since.

"Years passed, my brother, Shining Armor, became Captain of the Royal Guard and I was receiving gentlecolt callers." She frowned suddenly. "My parents were investigating a series of murders, stallions who had been killed in a way most brutal. All they told me was that the victims had died from severe blood loss, even though there wasn't much blood at the scenes, and had curious injuries on their throats."

She hung her head. "I suppose they had gotten too close. One night, they were found in an alley, killed in the same manner."

Fluttershy put her hoof to her mouth. Twilight raised her head back up, her eyes filled with fortitude.

"I was determined to find their killer. So I spent my days and nights studying their notes on the case, making inquiries at the police station." She heaved a sigh. "No pony took me seriously, not even my own brother. They didn't think a mare should be concerned in such gruesome affairs."

" *I* took you seriously," Spike said, reaching over to take her hoof.

"Yes. Spike was the only one who would help me with my investigation, him and one other person." She stared forlornly out the window. "His name was Flash Sentry. He was one of my brother's soldiers." She shut her eyes. "We loved each other. We were going to be married. He did all he could to help me with my investigation, even went to take interviews whenever I was denied. He stood by me until the end."

She lowered her head again. "The two of us were coming home late one night. We had just come back from an interview with Count Trenderhoof, which had turned out useless. Then we heard hoofsteps behind us. Several sets of them. We tried picking up the pace, but so did our stalkers. We ducked into an alleyway, which we realized immediately was a bad idea when three figures blocked the exit."

She sniffed. "Flash tried to protect me, but the mares started singing and…he was put in a trance."

She buried her face in her hooves. "I should've teleported us out of there, but I was so afraid, and I had only just started learning the spell. The mares transformed, sprouted bat wings, grew enormous fangs and pounced on us. I would've died had it not been for my magic, but I couldn't take on three of them at once!"

She started sobbing and Spike walked over to her to pat her on the back. "I managed to get them away from Flash, but…I was too late. He was so still…so limp…so…lifeless."

Spike offered her a handkerchief, which she gladly took and blew into. Once she had calmed down, she continued:

"I didn't know who those mares were, but I knew they weren't normal ponies, and I *knew* they were the same creatures that had killed my parents, and all those stallions. After losing Flash, I was more determined than ever to put those demons to justice. Of course, I didn't tell any pony what happened, except Spike, for who would believe three mares could do something so horrible?

"After Flash's funeral, Spike and I searched through all the books regarding otherworldly monsters. The minute I found a passage on vampires, I knew that's what they were. It made sense: the blood-drinking, the fangs, the bat wings. Except these particular vampires seemed to have a siren-like quality about them, which is why I nicknamed them the Sirens, but their hypnotic powers hadn't seemed to work on me. I assume it only works on stallions.

"I devoted the next year to this investigation, which concerned my brother. He said he missed Flash and our parents too, but it was

time I moved on. But I wasn't giving up. I was onto something big, and I *had* to stop those awful mares before they killed any pony else, especially me and those close to me. I strung garlic around the house, forbade Spike from letting strangers in and studied several protection spells.

"Then, a few months ago, I had my big break. News spread about a midnight massacre in Zebiu. I'm sure you've heard of it?"

Fluttershy nodded, remembering such headlines about four months ago.

"Then you'll remember that all those victims had had their throats ripped open, presumably by some loose forest animal. Some witnesses had claimed seeing a pony with bat wings and poofy hair. That's when I knew I had to investigate." She paused when she saw Fluttershy's confusion. "One of the vampires who had killed Flash had poofy hair.

"Thankfully, Shining Armor had permitted me to make a trip to Zebiu, thinking it would take my mind off things. I didn't tell him my true intentions. I started making inquiries, but once again, few would take me seriously. I had to consult a witch and some street urchins, who believed my vampire theory and claimed there was a whole coven of them living in the forest, but they weren't sure where. I also heard about the secluded Count Discord, who had a castle in the forest. Thinking he might have seen something, I decided to pay him a visit."

"I remembered that day," Spike said thoughtfully. "Applejack was the one to answer the door and she was so shocked to hear we were investigating the massacre, she kept staring at us as if we had two heads! Oh, I mean two heads *each* !" He chuckled awkwardly. "Of *course* we have two heads!"

"Anyway," Twilight continued, "Pinkie Pie, who had just been changed a few days ago, came flying down the stairs, crying for blood. We soon found out she had been the cause of the deaths here in Zebiu." She saw the terror in Fluttershy's face. "She had no control over it! Newborn vampires are extremely thirsty during their first few days and are difficult to restrain!" She glanced down at her

necklace. "I wear this charm to keep myself from losing control.

"I was shocked to find a whole castle full of vampires, but I knew none of them were the ones I was looking for. Discord was about to erase our memories, but I pleaded with him to let us remember. I explained our investigation to all of them and begged that they help by teaching me all about vampires so that I would know how to defeat the terrible three, next time I met them. Rarity and Applejack were the first to agree to these terms, but it took a while for Discord.

"Eventually, he agreed to let us stay in the castle so that we may learn from them, in exchange for a few occasional pints of my blood when they were low on nourishment. They were all really wonderful, and actually took my questions seriously. Soon, for the first time in years, I started to feel like I was home."

She sighed. "But I had given my blood all too willingly. I wasn't paying attention to just how much. I grew sick. Last week, I was at Death's Door. Then the Master did what I had asked him to do should anything ever happen to me. You can fill in the blanks."

Twilight looked steadily at Fluttershy. "You must understand. As a vampire with heightened senses and enhanced magic, I stand a better chance against the Sirens next time I encounter them. Aside from garlic, wooden stakes and sunlight, the only thing that can kill a vampire is another vampire."

Her red eyes now shone with fury. "It wouldn't be enough to put those monsters in jail. No jail could hold them. The only way I can avenge the death of my parents and fiancé, the only way I can protect others from the same fate, is if I send those demons back to Hell where they belong."

Fluttershy watched the unicorn in wonder as she said this last statement. The words were truly horrible, and yet, Twilight had said them firmly and passionately, as if she had thought long and hard on this decision. Fluttershy pitied her, and this reasonably decisive manner of hers gave the pegasus a certain respect for her, even if her vengeful desires were slightly disconcerting.

"You need not fear me," Twilight assured her. "I've only been a

vampire for a short time. I haven't killed yet, and I certainly won't harm you."

Fluttershy nodded. "I don't believe you would."

And that was the truth. She couldn't imagine the unicorn harming ponies the way those Sirens had harmed her loved ones.

"What happened to your brother?" she asked.

"He's still in Bullarest," Twilight replied. "I still correspond with him, but it will only be a matter of time before I have to break contact with him." She looked down at her hooves. "The greatest price of being immortal is that you don't get to take your loved ones with you."

There was a long silence.

"I'm sorry," Fluttershy finally said.

"Don't be," Twilight said, raising her head. "This was *my* choice, and one day you might have to face the same."

The pegasus shook her head. "You must understand. I'm sorry for what happened to you, but I can't…"

"I know. Mortals don't have the same instincts as us. Nevertheless, our master is not going to rest until he is with his true love, which, as far as he is concerned, is you."

"He doesn't love me. All he's interested in is my beauty."

"That is not true."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I may not be able to read his mind, but if there's one thing I know about love, it's more than just admiring a pretty face. It's about sacrifice." She locked eyes with Fluttershy. "And I've known the Master long enough to know that if he ever had to lay his life down for you, he would."

They stared at each other for a while, until Fluttershy hung her head.

Twilight sighed and stood up.

"Just think about it, domnişoară. Come on, Spike."

And with that, they were gone from the room and Fluttershy was left to mull over the story she had just heard.

Okay, it's not really a secret who those three singing vampires are, is it?

The Inmate

Please forgive me for the torment I'm putting these characters through. I warned you this was going to be darker than what I usually write.

Because they were concerned for their master, the vampire maidens took turns standing outside his door, listening for signs that he may be hurting himself. It was Rainbow Dash's turn now, and she was getting so bored that she started counting the stone bricks in the walls. She was on six hundred and seventy-four when she heard a loud clang. She snapped around and threw the door open.

"Master, are you okay?!"

In the middle of the room stood a large bell and Discord was thumping his head against it, making it reverberate throughout the room.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid!" he yelled with each ring.

Rainbow knew this action wouldn't physically hurt her master, but it was still painful to watch.

"Master!" she cried, flying to his side to try and pull him away. "Master, stop!"

But as he was larger and stronger than her, he wouldn't budge.

"Stupid, stupid, *stupid* !"

"Master, knock it off! Seriously, this is just sad! You're embarrassing yourself!"

Discord straightened up and groaned as he slumped to the floor, the bell popping out of sight. Rainbow heaved a sigh and sat beside him.

"I know yesterday night was heartbreaking for you and all, but you've gotta get a grip on yourself! What happened to the fierce vampire who caught me ninety-five years ago? What happened to the Discord who wouldn't let anything get in his way, not even his own feelings, and would fight for what was his?"

"You don't understand," he whimpered, burying his face in his hands. "I can't just swoop in and take her! She is my mate, but she is *not mine* !"

"Still. If you want the girl so bad, you gotta stop this whining, go out there and win her! No mare wants a wimp for a husband!"

Discord said nothing as he curled into a ball on the floor. Rainbow sighed, seeing that she had to try a different tactic.

"Hey, I know what'll cheer you up," she said with a smile. "Let's go out prowling like we used to! You remember the old days, when it was just you, me and Rarity? The three of us would own the night, spook a few drunken stallions into wetting themselves!" She laughed. "And remember those pranks we used to pull on Rarity? Like when we drew on her face? Oh, that was priceless! The best part: she didn't even know it because she couldn't see herself in the mirror! Am I right, am I right?"

She nudged her master in the side, urging him to laugh along with her, but he didn't even flinch. Rainbow Dash frowned.

"Well, if you're not feeling it tonight…Pinkie and I could hunt for…"

Discord shook his head. "I told you I don't want any of you…"

"…killing anything. I know, I know. But we gotta eat, Master, and you don't look fit for…"

"I said no."

"Come on, we can do it! We've done it before!"

"And I'm still sore at you for that."

"We had no choice! You were acting all gaga over Flutter—"

She bit her lip, but the unfinished word had already made impact with Discord. He reached out his claw and used it to pull his limp body away from Rainbow. The mare sighed and stood up.

"We need to eat. And until you get your act together, we're getting our own food."

As she exited the room and shut the door, she muttered, "That darn mare better come around soon."

When Coco Pommel answered the door the next morning, she was met with a pink, smiling face.

"Hi!" the pink mare exclaimed, her face too close for comfort. "I'm Pinkie Pie! I work for Count Discord and he has a very heartfelt, emotional message for Lady Fluttershy, probably because he's crazy about her, but can you blame him? She's really pretty! And now we're all trying to get them together so they can get married and live happily ever after! Cupcake?"

Coco stared at the basket of cupcakes in her face, at a loss for words.

"Um, uh…"

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Pinkie asked, her smile not wavering an inch.

"Oh! Yes, yes, of course. Come in."

She opened the door wider for the pink mare to bounce inside.

"I'll, um, announce your presence. You can wait in the, uh, east drawing room."

"Aw man!" Pinkie whined, slapping herself in the forehead. "I forgot my sketchbook at home!"

Coco tilted her head at her in confusion. Pinkie then snorted with laughter.

"I'm just messing with you, Coco! I know what a drawing room is!"

"H-How…how did you know my name?"

Pinkie smirked at her, leaned forward and whispered, "I know *everything* !"

The maid blinked and backed away slowly. "Yes, um…just have a seat in there and I'll…get my mistress. Would you, um…like anything while you wait? Tea? Crumpets?"

"No, thanks! I only drink blood!"

Coco squeaked and raced out of the drawing room.

"What a nice mare!" Pinkie piped as she made herself comfortable in an armchair.

The maid found Starlight and Fluttershy in the library, one giving elocution lessons to the other.

"Again," Starlight ordered. "The *rain* …"

"The *rain* …" Fluttershy repeated.

They were interrupted when Coco burst open the doors, panting with fright.

"What *is* it, Coco?!" Starlight bellowed. "Can't you see we're busy?!"

"Sorry, doamnă," Coco heaved. "But…there's a mare downstairs who wishes to see Domnişoară Fluttershy, from…Count Discord."

Starlight's eyebrows shot up as she turned to Fluttershy, whose face was beat red. "Well! For some pony who isn't interested in you, he sure is persistent!"

"I'll, um," Fluttershy stammered, rising from her seat, "go see what it's about this time."

"I would recommend having some guard about you, domnişoară," Coco said, quivering. "The mare is quite…eccentric."

Fluttershy immediately guessed who the visitor was this time. "Yes, thank you, Coco, but I can manage on my own."

When she met Pinkie in the drawing room, she was hanging upside-down in her armchair with her skirts drooped over her chest in an unflattering manner and a basket balancing on her back hooves.

"Hi, Fluttershy!" Pinkie greeted, waving as if there was nothing unusual about her position.

"Hello," Fluttershy uttered, cautiously stepping towards her. "It's Pinkie Pie, isn't it?"

Pinkie gasped, gripped her chest with her hooves and looked up at her with puppy eyes, her smile growing wider. "You remembered! I'm so happy!"

"Right," Fluttershy said as she steadily lowered herself in the chair across from her. "Um…what's in that basket?"

"Oh!" Pinkie piped as she effortlessly spun into a right-side-up position, the basket falling onto her lap. "We had a lot of cake batter left over, so I made some cupcakes!" She held the basket out to her. "Here, try one!"

Fluttershy wasn't worried about being poisoned anymore. It was the pink mare's unusually ecstatic mood that made her hesitant. Nevertheless, she reached into the basket and chose a cupcake with yellow frosting.

"So," said Pinkie, "do you wanna hear my entire life story or what?"

Fluttershy didn't see any point in saying no, as she had a feeling Pinkie was going to tell her anyway, so she nodded in response. The earth pony took a deep breath before beginning:

"I was raised on a rock farm with my Ma, my Pa, and my three sisters. The oldest was Limestone, one tough cookie. She had a bit of a temper, but was actually really sweet! Then there was Maud. Even though I don't usually pick favorites, I'd have to say Maud was my favorite. We did a lot together, like make rock candy necklaces! Then there was Marble, my baby sister by a few minutes. She

wasn't much of a talker, but so adorable!

"Life on the rock farm was okay, though a little dull. Ma and Pa didn't let us play much. There was no smiling, no laughing. Only rocks."

She sighed. "It got boring, moving rocks all over the place. My sisters and I would stay up some nights telling each other stories, but as they got older and started meeting stallions, we kinda grew apart. Soon it was time for *me* to consult the Choosing Stone."

"The what?" Fluttershy asked, scrunching her nose.

"The Choosing Stone! It's this rock that chooses your lifelong partner! Kind of like vampire mating laws, only instead of Fate, couples are decreed by a rock!" She rolled her eyes. "And it's *much* less romantic, if you ask me. Anyway, when it was my turn to consult the Choosing Stone, guess what it said?"

"What?"

"Nothing. Apparently, there's no pony out there for me. So that meant I was stuck on the rock farm for the rest of my life, and with my sisters getting married and my parents trying hard to find me a husband anyway—none of them ever stayed for long—I had no one to talk to. No sisters, no husband, no friends.

"So, I made my *own* friends! I made them out of whatever I could find! A sack of flour, a piece of lint, a bucket of turnips and, of course, rocks! We all had such wonderful times together and had the *best* tea parties and I would tell them *everything* !"

She paused. "But I guess Ma and Pa wanted me to have some *real* friends. One day, these stallions came and Ma and Pa told me to get into the wagon with them. They were really nice, and they took me to this awesome hotel called *Asseeloom* !"

"What?"

" *Asseeloom* ! At least I *think* that's how you say it. That was the name on the building: A-S-Y-L-U-M!"

Fluttershy said nothing.

"It was a nice place. I had a soft, cushy room and a snuggly blanket I could put my forelegs through! It was hard to get out of though."

She wondered if she should tell Pinkie just what kind of place her parents had sent her to, but decided to keep her mouth shut for the moment. The blow might be too much for the pink pony to bear.

"The ponies there were really friendly!" Pinkie piped. "Though they talked kinda funny. I mean some of the other guests mumbled a lot, or didn't talk at all, and the staff talked really slowly and kept asking me weird questions like what did I dream last night or if I believed rocks could talk. Well, *sure* , if a unicorn cast a spell on them or something. Don't know why they kept asking questions I'd already answered. The food was also pretty good, though I don't know why they didn't have cupcakes.

"Anyway, I was there for a while, and it eventually became really, really *boring* ! I was getting tired of all the questions they were asking me and it came to a point where I was living the same day over and over again! Not literally, but you know what I mean. Besides, I missed my family, so I asked if I could visit. They said no, but I really wanted a change of scenery. So I wriggled my way out of my blanket and walked out the door. Then they chose that time to start a game of chase! I must've won, because they never managed to catch me!

"I found my way back to the rock farm, but when my parents saw me, they got really scared for some reason! I tried cheering them up with cupcakes, but they kept staring at me like I was Frankenpony! Anyway, I decided I wasn't needed there and went on the road with a Romane caravan! Have you noticed there seem to be a lot of those in this country?

"The Romanes were nice ponies. They let me tag along if I helped bring money in. That's where I learned to play all those instruments. But then it got tedious again and we parted ways in Zebiu. There were rumors going around about vampires in the forest! I'd always loved vampire stories and thought it would be fun to be a vampire! After all, I had nothing else to do.

"So I went into the forest and found this dark, creepy castle! I knew

that's where the vampires lived because come on! It's a dark, creepy castle! Rarity was the one who answered the door and I asked if she was a vampire, and if she was, could she make *me* a vampire?

"She tried closing the door on me, but I broke it down and begged her to change me. Everyone else came down, including Discord, to see what the racket was. I just kept begging and begging and begging until they gave in. Then they started blathering on about all these warnings I didn't pay attention to and then Discord bit me."

To Fluttershy's shock, the corners of Pinkie's mouth were slowly falling. "Next thing I knew, I was chained to a bed, covered in blood. They started telling me what had happened. Apparently, I went on some sort of rampage. I wish I could've seen myself. It would've been interesting seeing myself on a rampage. Then again, I kind of like not remembering killing ponies. The transformation had made me so strong and fast, it took forever for the girls to catch me. They had to chain me up and get this charm from a witch to restrain me."

She paused, and her eyes suddenly became interested in the carpet pattern. "It's funny. I thought it'd be cool to have vampire powers and all, but all the blood drinking somehow hadn't come to mind."

Her lip quivered. "I never wanted to hurt any pony. I just wanted to be…happy."

There was a long silence. Fluttershy was not sure what to think of this mare. She had, shamefully, taken her to be not very bright, but then wondered if this perky, nonchalant way Pinkie had of telling her disturbing history was to cover up the misery she truly felt inside. Did she really know what her parents had done to her? Had this playfulness all been an act? From what she could understand, Fluttershy didn't think this mare had deserved to be locked up. As quirky as her personality was, she seemed virtually harmless. When she was in control of herself, that is.

"You think I'm crazy, don't you?" Pinkie asked in a cracked voice.

"No!" Fluttershy exclaimed, a little too loudly. "No. I think you're very…optimistic."

The earth mare looked up at her and smiled again. "I can see why the Master's crazy about you."

Fluttershy closed her eyes and sighed. "I knew you were going to bring him up eventually."

"Can you blame me? I *hate* it when my friends are unhappy! Discord's unhappy, and so are you."

The pegasus blinked in surprise. "What makes you think *I'm* unhappy?"

"For one thing, you haven't smiled *once* since I've been here! But you *were* smiling the other night when you were with the Master!"

Fluttershy turned away to hide the redness in her cheeks. "I was just…laughing at his jokes. And the reason I'm not smiling now is because…well, that *wasn't* a pleasant story."

"Trust me. I *know* unhappy when I see it, smile or no smile. I also know you hate living here in this house."

"W-What? How do you…? I mean why do you…?"

"Don't get me wrong. This place is nice, but *dead* ! And this is coming from an *un* dead vampire! When's the last time you've had excitement in here?"

Fluttershy stood up, trying to keep her temper. "Look, Pinkie Pie, if this is your way of trying to get me with your Master…"

"Who's talking about the Master? You're legitimately miserable!"

"Please!" Fluttershy shouted, raising her hoof. "I've heard enough! Now please, get out of my house!"

Pinkie sighed. "If that's what you want, I'll go. Keep the cupcakes though. At least one of us can eat them." She gave Fluttershy a long, sorrowful look before leaving. "To be honest, that's the only thing I miss."

Pinkie's was the most difficult backstory to come up with. I was originally going to have it "she just wanted to be a vampire," but then felt there should be a little more to it than that.

I really don't think the Pies would do that sort of thing to Pinkie, unless they were truly worried for her.

The Seamstress

WARNING! SUGGESTIVE CONTENT AHEAD!

Starlight and Fluttershy were at the breakfast table when Coco came in. She opened her mouth to speak.

"Let me guess," Starlight interrupted with a roll of her eyes. "Another messenger from Count Discord?"

"Y-Yes, doamnă," Coco replied. "I told her to wait in the east drawing room."

Starlight raised an eyebrow at her niece. "Do you mind telling me exactly what this count wants and why he keeps sending all these messengers?"

Fluttershy bit her lip as she looked down at her hooves. "He, uh… he's…"

Was there any point in hiding from her aunt, anymore? How could she say Count Discord wasn't interested in her when his servants wouldn't stop showing up?

"If I may, doamnă," Coco said with a curtsy, "I heard the pink one say the other day that the Count was, as she said, 'crazy about Domnişoară Fluttershy' and intends to, I believe, marry her."

Fluttershy blushed as her aunt looked at her in appalment.

"You *lied* to me?!" Starlight demanded.

"I, um…"

The unicorn stood up angrily. "You told me the Count didn't think you were pretty enough, yet his servants are saying he wants to *marry* you?!"

"He…he…"

"Why keep this from me?!"

"I'm sorry!" Fluttershy squeaked. "It's just…you don't know him, Auntie. He's…he's…"

"I'm going to see this new messenger and demand the truth!"

"No, Auntie, wait!"

But she was too late. Her aunt was already storming out of the dining room. Fluttershy jumped up from her seat to follow her. Rarity was quietly waiting in the drawing room. Starlight stopped in her tracks.

"I remember you," she said. " *You're* the rude mare who talked me out of buying that gown!"

"Well," Rarity replied calmly, "you *were* making a horrible decision. The gown I selected worked, didn't it?"

Starlight opened her mouth but then paused. Then she sighed in defeat.

"Yes. Yes, it did. But what I'd like to know is what exactly your master's intentions towards my niece are?! *She* tells me he isn't interested, but my maid reports that one of your friends says otherwise! Which is the truth, domnişoară?!"

Rarity glanced briefly at Fluttershy before responding. "If you must know, doamnă, Count Discord is in fact interested in your niece." Starlight darted her eyes at Fluttershy. "Now, he does not wish you to think of him as hasty, but he does hope to, one day, marry her."

Starlight folded her forelegs across her chest. "Fluttershy, care to explain this?"

"I apologize if your niece has kept this information from you, but it's only because the Count hasn't officially proposed. He wishes to court her first, so that they may get to know one another. The choice will be ultimately Fluttershy's though."

" *Fluttershy's* ?! I'm not sure your master fully understands procedure! As Fluttershy's legal guardian, it is *I* who decides who she marries! If Count Discord desires her hoof, he must consult with *me* in person!"

"We can arrange for that, if you'd like," Rarity said with some hesitance in her voice. "Nevertheless, Count Discord will only marry her if she is willing. He will not have her otherwise."

Starlight narrowed her eyes at the white unicorn. "Well, it's nice to see that at least *one* of you has *some* manners."

"Thank you, doamnă. Now, if you will excuse us, I must give Lady Fluttershy my message."

"Whatever you say to my niece, you can say in front of me."

"Please, doamnă," Rarity said through her teeth. "This is a *private* matter."

Starlight huffed as she turned on her hoof and stomped out of the room. Fluttershy looked at Rarity sincerely as she sat across from her.

"I wish you hadn't said that to Auntie," she said. "She has enough suitors lined up as it is."

"I understand," Rarity nodded, "but she was sure to ask more questions if I didn't tell her *something* . Besides, I thought it would be better if your aunt somewhat approved the match once you and the Master are married."

"How many times do I have to say it? I don't *want* to marry Count Discord! And don't tell me how much he loves me, because it doesn't matter if I don't love him! Look. I'm sorry if all your lives were so horrible that you had no choice but to be bitten, but *I* don't want that kind of life! You say he's good and kind, but so far, the only thing you've said that seems good and kind about him is that he bit you when you asked! For all you know, he would've *eaten* you if you hadn't asked!"

Rarity was silent for a moment, but she did not break gaze with

Fluttershy. "Rainbow said she had told you, but I suppose you've forgotten that unlike the others, I wasn't bitten by Discord."

Fluttershy's scowl vanished. "Oh. I…I'm sorry."

"That's alright. After all, this whole situation must seem…unorthodox to you. But I am sure that once you hear my story, you will understand just how good and kind the Master is, and that he really means it when he says he's in love with you."

Fluttershy said nothing, but made herself comfortable so she could listen to the unicorn's story.

"I may not look it," Rarity said with a slight chuckle, "but I'm actually over a hundred years old. A lot of changes were going on in the world when I was still mortal. Amare-ica was new, Prance was going through political changes for the seventh time," she groaned, "and mares had even *less* rights back then.

"I was fortunate to get a job as a seamstress in a little dress shop. I didn't mind. I always *loved* fashion, and sewing was my favorite pastime." She paused as she got a dreamy look in her eye. "I'd always dreamed of opening my own boutique, and that ponies from all over the world would come to see my designs!

"Fortunately, my parents were very supportive of my ambition and weren't in a hurry for me to get married. They didn't see any need, as I had no trouble attracting stallions."

Fluttershy had no doubt, for the unicorn was quite lovely.

"I had so many gentlecolt callers," she continued, "poor Mother and Father couldn't keep up with them all! So they left the decision up to me. My sister Sweetie Belle kept joking that I loved the attention so much that I couldn't choose just one!"

She frowned suddenly. "In retrospect, I wish they hadn't put so much trust in my judgment."

"Why?" Fluttershy asked. "Did you ever choose?"

Rarity hung her head with a solemn expression and said in a hoarse

voice, "Yes. There was a stallion who kept coming to the shop. I would run the store sometimes, you see. He kept saying he was looking for a gown for his mother, but he never made a decision. Finally, he confessed it had all been an excuse to see me."

She smiled slightly. "His name was Tenderheart. He was an aspiring writer who'd been traveling around the world for inspiration. Oh, he wrote such exquisite poetry, and his handsome face and charming smile were enough to ensnare me. After a while, I introduced him to my family and we became engaged."

Her smile vanished, and Fluttershy didn't think it possible, but she seemed to have become even paler.

"One night, we decided to take a moonlit walk. Father always warned me about being out alone with a stallion, especially at night, but since we were engaged, I trusted him. We wandered into the woods, he began kissing me and he whispered in my ear, asking if we could…try each other out, before we were married.

"I told him it would be better to wait for our wedding night. It would be more special that way, but then…I'm not sure what happened exactly, but after one look in his deep, violet eyes, I found myself unable to say no to him. The last thing I remember is lifting up my skirts and then everything going black."

She paused, and closed her eyes, her lip quivering. "When I woke up, I was in a strange bed. I felt…so cold and…so thirsty. So terribly, terribly thirsty. Then this terrifying creature came in and, thinking this monster had kidnapped me for dinner—or perhaps carnal reasons—I screamed. He tried to calm me down and offered me a goblet of a red liquid. I didn't know what it was at the time, but it smelled so good, I gulped it down without even thinking.

"Once my thirst was satisfied, I demanded the creature who he was, why I was here and where my fiancé was. He said his name was Discord, and that he had found me lying unconscious in the woods. He said I had been bitten by a vampire, and that not only was *he* a vampire, but so was I.

"I didn't believe him. I didn't *want* to. Then he conjured a mirror by

magic and when I looked into it…my reflection wasn't there. I accused *him* of biting me, but he said when he had found me, most of my blood had been drained! I told him all I remembered was my fiancé and I about to…"

She stopped to take a handkerchief out of her apron pocket and dabbed her eyes with it. "That's when I put all the pieces together. Tenderheart never loved me. He only saw me as his conquest…his next meal. I started crying, and Discord, to my surprise, tried to comfort me, saying I could stay with him so he could help me get through my transformation. I felt I could trust him. After all, I'd been out for a long time and he could've done *anything* with me. He could've drunk whatever blood was left in me, but he *hadn't* .

"Once I'd grown accustomed to my vampirism, Discord said I could go if I wanted to, but I decided to stay. I'd come to think of him as a friend, and probably the only decent male I would ever come to know, for he never once made advances towards me, or treated me like a little filly. In fact, I felt like his equal.

"So I stayed, and in order to keep up his appearance as a count, I pretended to be his niece and would accompany him on outings, and make sure he was hidden whenever his disguise slipped. Then too many years went by that I didn't look my age anymore, so we had to go into hiding for a while. Then Rainbow Dash joined us, and decades after that, Applejack, and so on and so forth."

"Whatever happened to Tenderheart?" Fluttershy inquired.

Rarity looked up at her with a scowl. "That leech! I never saw him again after that! No doubt he ran away as soon as he was done with me! I don't even think Tenderheart was his real name! For he used a different one when he…" She quickly stopped herself. "Anyway, if I ever see that scum again, I'm going to make him pay for what he did to me! Why, I'll rip him into tiny little pieces and then feed them to the…"

She trailed off when she noticed Fluttershy quivering in fear.

"Forgive me," Rarity apologized, clearing her throat. "You must understand. Tenderheart took more than my mortality."

"That's horrible," Fluttershy uttered.

"Yes, I know. Discord and the others have kept their eyes out for him, but I doubt he'll ever return to the scene of the crime." She paused. "I sort of lost faith in all males since Tenderheart, with the exception of Discord and Spike, but then again, Spike's young and neither of them are ponies. When I first met Discord, however, since he was of Tenderheart's kind, I thought he was going to take advantage of me too. But no, he looked after me until I recovered, and he still treats me like his oldest friend. And, because he knows what's happened to me, he is never, *ever* going to make another mare suffer in the same way."

Fluttershy could not find an argument for this. She didn't know how much of what the unicorn was saying was true, but then again, who would ever lie about something like *that* ?

She was startled when Rarity's hoof touched hers.

"And he would *certainly* never do a thing like that to *you* . You're his…"

"Soulmate, I know," Fluttershy muttered, pulling her hoof away. "You know something? My aunt is actually right. Why doesn't Count Discord come and tell me all this himself?"

"Well, after what had passed between you two the other night, would you have listened?"

Fluttershy said nothing.

"I'd tell you the Master's tale," Rarity continued, "but it's better that you hear it from his mouth, just as you heard all our stories from *our* mouths." She leaned forward. "Perhaps you would consider coming to dinner again tonight?"

Fluttershy looked away. "I…I…I need some more time to think about it."

The unicorn nodded and stood. "Well, that's all *I* had to say. If you ever change your mind, you know where to find us."

Once Rarity was gone, Fluttershy began contemplating all the stories she had heard this week. First, there was the Romane vagabond who had run away from home to escape an arranged marriage. Then there was the young investigator chasing after her parents and fiancé's murderers. Next, there was the former inmate of an asylum who had been incarcerated by her own parents. Finally, there was the seamstress who had actually had a happy life, which had been taken from her by a cruel stallion.

Other than being vampires, they all seemed to have one thing in common: they had been notoriously wronged, either by those closest to them or by heartless demons. The only story she hadn't heard was Applejack's, but after hearing everyone else's, she could guess hers wasn't pleasant either.

Then there was Discord. Fluttershy wasn't sure what to think of him, but she now understood why the five mares were loyal to him. They had led dreadful lives and would rather accept the price of immortality than go back to them. Fluttershy just didn't think that was the fate for her.

And yet, even after all the mares had told her, Fluttershy still didn't know that much about Discord. Perhaps he was kind to his servants, friends, whatever they were; but what was *his* history? What had made him a vampire? He had said he was the kind that was born, not made. Did that mean he had lived with this all his life, with no choice at all?

This did not mean Fluttershy had changed her mind about marrying him. Even if there was a possibility that he wasn't as monstrous as he appeared, she didn't love him. She wasn't sure if she ever could. After all, they didn't have that much in common, at least from what she could tell.

Then again, as she recalled their dinner together, she had never talked that much with a male before, and his quips *were* amusing. In fact, she could not remember another time she had laughed so hard. He also played the piano beautifully, and she wondered if he had meant it when he said he could teach her. She hadn't told him she could sing, for she was really shy about singing in front of others, but if she sang while he played…

"Well, what did she have to say?"

Fluttershy jumped at her aunt's voice as she snapped out of her thoughts.

"Well?" Starlight asked again, crossing her forelegs and looking down at her sternly.

"Oh, um…" Fluttershy stammered, glancing down at her hooves. "She, um…she was wondering if I could…come to the Count's again for dinner."

"And?"

"And I said I'd think about it…"

"You'd *think* about it?! Fluttershy, you should've said yes!"

"But I thought you hated the…"

"I would've let you go if I went along with you this time! We could've done this thing properly! But you said you'd *think about it* ?!"

"Rarity said I could always answer later…"

"But by that time the Count might pick another bride! Didn't I teach you *anything* ?! When a suitor starts to show interest, snag him while you can!"

She slapped herself in the forehead and stomped out, muttering, "Where did I go wrong?"

Fluttershy felt guilty for putting her aunt through all this turmoil, but knew it wouldn't be any better if she knew the truth. That was another concern if she ever agreed to marry Count Discord. How would her aunt react? Surely she would notice eventually that her niece wasn't aging, or refusing to eat anything given to her. There was also the matter of having to drink blood. Whether it was from ponies or animals, she just couldn't go through with something so horrible, even if it was for her own survival.

But most importantly, she didn't want more ponies urging her to

marry this one person, regardless if she loved him or not.

Well, some of you guessed that about Rarity. Now you know.

Orphan

I have a feeling this story's going to end up longer than most of my stories.

Applejack was awoken by a stream of light. She glared up at Rarity, who had opened the lid to her coffin.

"Evening!" she chirped.

Applejack narrowed her eyes and grumbled, "Go away. I'm sleeping in tonight."

She slammed the casket lid closed, but Rarity used her magic to open it again.

"You can go back to sleep in a moment. I just have a question for you."

"No!"

Slam!

"I hadn't asked anything yet!"

Applejack opened the coffin an inch so Rarity could hear. "I know what you're going to ask! Ya want me to go see the Lady Fluttershy and tell her my life story! I told ya! I'm not telling!"

Slam!

"But we've told all *our* stories! She has to know…"

"She doesn't *need* to know," Applejack shouted from inside, "and she never *will* know!"

"But if she knew how the Master helped you, she would…"

When the casket opened this time, Applejack sat up, her eyes burning red. "I. DON'T. CARE! NOW GET OUT OF MY ROOM!"

Then she shut herself in one final time. Rarity sighed, seeing this was a lost cause, and left Applejack's room for Discord's. Pinkie was standing guard.

"How is he?" Rarity asked.

"He's still asleep," Pinkie replied. "So, did AJ change her mind?"

"No. Then again, she's always hated having to relive that horrid memory."

"So what do we do now?"

Rarity walked past her and knocked on the door.

"Master?" she called softly.

There was no reply. She pressed her ear to the door and listened carefully. When she heard steady breathing, she moved away.

"Master, if you can hear me, I just want you to know we've told her our stories, and…Fluttershy said she'd think things over. Maybe if you…if you *did* something for her…show her that you really care…"

She trailed off as she realized she might as well be talking to a wall, whether her master was asleep or not. She sighed in defeat and went back downstairs.

Inside, Discord was having another dream. He was in the grassy meadow again, lying in the sun, Fluttershy's soft hooves caressing his head, her beautiful face smiling down at him.

"Why can't this be real?" he sighed.

"It *can* be real," she said in a melodic voice.

"No, it can't. If this were real, I'd be burning up right now. I can never enjoy the warmth of the sun, or of you."

"Yes, you can. You just have to have confidence in yourself."

"You're afraid of me."

"Then *show* me what you have to offer, *find* what we have in common," he tilted his head up, " *impress* me, and I'll be yours."

When he woke, he sat up so quickly that he bumped his head on the lid of his coffin, knocking it open. He cried out as he fell to the floor.

"You alright, Master?" Pinkie called from outside.

"Yeah," Discord muttered, standing up and massaging his head. "Just fell out of bed."

"Okie dokie lokie!"

He conjured up an arm chair for him to think in. The revelation from his dream had gotten him so excited. There was no use moping about his failed attempt to win his true love's heart. If he was ever going to get through to her, he must actually get out there and do something about it! He didn't know how, but he had to try!

He made a window appear and once he had confirmed it was nighttime, he took the form of a bat and flew out into the night. He didn't need to see where he was going. He had lived near Zebiu long enough to know where everything was. It didn't take him long to find Fluttershy's house. He flapped beside the windows and searched the rooms, until her found her lying asleep in a large, canopy bed.

He turned back into himself and perched on her windowsill as he took in the sight of her. She looked so lovely in her peaceful slumber, her eyelashes gently kissing her rosy cheeks, her chest slowly rising and falling with every delicate breath, her silky pink strands spread across her golden pillow. It was all enough to take his breath away.

He wanted to watch her forever, but then remembered why he was there. So he tapped lightly on the glass.

"Fluttershy?" he whispered. "Fluttershy?"

The mare stirred in bed, but did not wake. He tried knocking harder, but, forgetting his own strength, smashed a hole through the window. Fluttershy woke with a start, so did Angel, who had been snuggling beside her.

"What?" she gasped, looking around frantically. "Who's there?"

Angel hissed at the window. Fluttershy turned and shrieked when she saw Discord and brought the golden blankets to her chest.

"What are you doing in my bedroom?!" she screamed.

"I'm not *in* your bedroom!" Discord insisted. "I'm at your bedroom *window* ."

"Go away! Don't come in here!"

"Relax, would you? I can't come in without your permission."

She stared at him. "Is that another 'mating law' or something?"

"No, it's a general vampire law. We can't enter another's home without being invited in by someone inside."

"Well, *you* don't have permission! Now go away!"

She hid her head under the covers, as if that would make him disappear.

"Fluttershy, please…" Discord entreated.

"Just leave me alone, please!" she called out from under the blankets. "Go away, or I'll call my aunt!"

"Look, I know all this has been overwhelming, but if you would let me explain…"

"I'll call her, I will! And she won't be happy to find you in my room!"

Discord bit his lip in worry. So far, this wasn't going very well. What had the Fluttershy in his dream said? Of course! Find what they had in common! But what?

"I'm serious!" Fluttershy hollered. "If you're not gone by the time I count to three, I'm calling my aunt! One…"

Then it occurred to him.

"Two…"

It was a long-shot, but it was all he had to go on.

"Thr—"

"Why do you live with your aunt?"

She was silent.

"What?" she croaked.

"Your aunt," Discord replied gently. "Why do you live with her?"

She lowered the covers somewhat and peered at him with one eye.

"Where are your parents? Why aren't you living with them?"

She stared at him for a while before muttering something.

"What was that?" Discord said, twisting his finger in his ear. "Didn't hear you. And *I'm* the one with super hearing."

After a few more minutes of silence, she pulled the covers completely away from her face and said softly:

"They're gone."

Discord gave her a look of sympathy. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright," she murmured, looking away from him. "My mother died giving birth to my baby brother, who didn't survive either, and my father died of pneumonia when I was seven."

He hung his head. "I never knew *my* parents."

Fluttershy turned back to him, her eyes wide in shock. "You…what?"

"I'd tell you about it, but since you don't want me here, I'll just…"

"No, wait!"

He looked at her in surprise. Fluttershy was surprised at herself too. What had possessed her to say such a thing? When she took a moment to think about it, she realized she was genuinely curious about Discord's past. After hearing every pony else's stories, his was the one that was still unknown, aside from Applejack's.

So Fluttershy pulled back the covers, slid out of bed and cautiously approached the draconequus at the window.

"Yes, please," she demanded softly. "Tell me about it. I…I want to hear."

Discord could not keep the smile off his face as he mended the window with his magic so she wouldn't cut her hooves on the glass. Unfortunately, now that the window was all closed up, it was hard for Fluttershy to hear. She moved to open it when Angel squeaked in protest.

"It's alright, Angel," she said over her shoulder as she undid the latch. "He won't hurt me."

"I can't make any promises for *you* , bunny," Discord growled through his teeth.

The rabbit squealed and hopped under the bed. Fluttershy sent Discord a glare, which made him shrink in guilt.

"Sorry," he said, forcing a laugh.

"Now," Fluttershy breathed, settling herself on the window seat, "you were saying?"

He smiled slightly before beginning his tale. "I told you before. I am a draconequus, meaning I was *born* like this. How? I don't know. No one knows. There have been many theories. Whether my mother was stared at by a vampire while pregnant or she ate some premature vegetables, either way, I was born.

"Once she saw what I was, she had me exposed so that I would burn in the sun. Fortunately, I was born at night, so the sun wouldn't come up for hours. I was also lucky that another, older vampire named Sombra had been passing by. He knew immediately I was a draconequus, and since he had never had any children, he took me in and raised me like a son."

"Your mother had you exposed?" Fluttershy asked in disbelief.

He shrugged. "What mare would want a blood-drinking monster for a son?"

She couldn't believe it. She refused to believe that a mother would do something like that to her own son, regardless of what he was.

"Master Sombra taught me everything I know," Discord continued. "He even taught me to control my powers, since he was a unicorn himself. I lived with him a few hundred years, until he met his mate.

"Her name was Radiant Hope. She was a healer. One night, my master was chased by a mob. I couldn't help him because I was at home and didn't know he was in danger, and he couldn't fly away because they had thrown garlic at him, burning his wing. He ran past Hope's cottage. Seeing this great injustice, she stepped out in front of the mob and defended him. The villagers protested that he was a vampire, and Hope said that it didn't matter what he was. They had no right to act so brutally.

"It was love at first sight. He knew, the instant she exemplified her courage and compassion, that they were destined to be together for all eternity." He sighed dreamily. "He told me how wonderful it was to meet your soulmate, that it feels like something has been missing all your life, and suddenly it's right there in front of you."

Fluttershy gulped. "And…you think… *I'm* your soulmate."

He looked guiltily at her. She avoided his gaze.

"Forgive me," he pleaded. "I didn't mean to put pressure on you the other night, but you must understand that I…"

"Can't stop thinking about me?" Fluttershy finished. "Yes. Twilight

told me."

"But it isn't my fault! You are just so beautiful and…"

"A *lot* of ponies tell me I'm beautiful!" she snapped in exasperation. "Even when I don't believe them, I wish they could say something else about me! Can't *you* do that?!"

Her voice grew quieter. "Or is that all you see in me?"

Her eyes were wide and watery. Looking into them, Discord suddenly understood. She didn't think she was beautiful. That's why she always flinched when he called her that. From the tone of her voice, she also didn't seem to think she was worth anything, probably because no one had ever convinced her that she was.

"Oh, Fluttershy," he whispered, gazing sincerely into her eyes. "You're so much *more* than that. Of course, your beauty *was* what initially drew me to you, but you're also kind, gentle, brave…"

"Brave?" Fluttershy uttered in disbelief.

He gestured to himself. "You're currently inches away from a vampire with the ability to kill you in one swift motion. And yet you trust me to be this close to you? I consider that pretty brave."

She glanced downward to hide the redness in her cheeks.

"You also stopped me from killing the stallions who had attacked you," he continued. "I've never met *anyone* merciful enough to do a thing like that, not even the girls!" She looked up as he said, "You have the kindest heart I've ever encountered."

"T-Thank you," she stammered, averting his eyes again. "Still, you hardly know me."

"Why do you think I came to see you tonight? I wish to know you better, and for you to know *me* better. That's why I'm telling you my history."

She glanced back up at him. "Can I ask you something?"

"Anything, my dear."

Her lip quivered. "I know you've bitten a few ponies, but…have you ever… *killed* any…?"

He frowned and hung his head shamefully as he whispered, "Yes."

She put her hoof to her mouth in horror.

"But it was a long time ago!" Discord insisted. "Master Sombra… wasn't the most merciful of vampires. He taught me to hunt animals *and* ponies. We didn't really have a preference. But when he met Radiant Hope, he developed a change of heart. After seeing how kind and nurturing she was, he couldn't bear to drain another pony."

"But he bit *her* , didn't he?" Fluttershy asked.

"Yes, he did, but with *her* permission. She loved him enough to stay with him forever."

She looked down at her hooves as she inquired, "W-What happens if a vampire…changes their mate… *without* permission?"

Discord's expression turned to one of disgust. "If the mating ceremony is performed without the other's permission, she does not become the vampire's mate, but his mistress."

She gulped. "What does that mean?"

"Well, the mating ceremony is meant to bind two vampires together for all eternity, but without consent from both parties, that bond is only half complete. *He* does not have any obligation for her, but *she* will be completely and unwillingly devoted to him. She is doomed to obey his every command and will not be free of him until he either dies or takes his official mate. Once he is with his mate, he can have no other."

Fluttershy paled at these words. "So…those mares are…?"

"No, no, no!" Discord cried in horror. "I may have done terrible things, but I would *never* succumb to something so vile!"

"I'm sorry! I just…"

He sighed. "It's alright. What makes my servants different is that I changed them in the normal way, meaning I simply bit them. The mating ceremony involves…"

He cringed, not sure if he should be talking about this with her so early.

"Go on," Fluttershy urged.

"You sure you want to know?" he asked, twiddling his fingers. "It's not very pretty."

She took a deep breath. "Yes."

"Okay then. In order to make some pony his mate, a vampire not only has to drink her blood if she is mortal, but she must…drink of *his* blood too."

Fluttershy looked like she was going to be sick.

"I warned you. Anyway, drinking each other's blood establishes the bond between them." He growled angrily. "Some scum will actually *force* the mares to drink! It sickens me, stallions who would use mares so…so vulgarly!"

"So…you're not going to…do that to me?"

He looked at her in surprise. "Of course not! Your blood is too precious to be spoiled in such a manner!" He paused. "Besides, if you were to… *ever* be mine, I rather it wasn't against your will."

Fluttershy was abashed beyond words as she gazed up at the draconequus in bewilderment. Her doubts about him were beginning to melt away upon hearing this declaration. The funniest thing was that she believed him. If he didn't want her to return his affections, why go through all this trouble? Why restrain himself when he could've bitten her at any time during the week? Why would his servants bother trying to convince her that his intentions were pure?

This realization was enough for her to give this creature a new level

of respect, for, as far as she could tell, he respected *her* .

When she didn't respond, he sighed sadly. "But I suppose you don't believe me."

"No!" Fluttershy insisted, grabbing his paw. "I mean yes! I believe you!"

His eyes were wide in surprise as they focused on the delicate hoof atop his enormous paw. Fluttershy followed his gaze and was surprised herself. She started pulling her hoof away, when his paw turned over to grasp it. He did it oh so gently, even though his paw was twice the size of her hoof, but he refused to harm her in any way. She lifted her head and locked gaze with him.

"C-Can I…?" he stuttered. "That is…m- *may* I…?"

He raised his claw towards her face. Fluttershy was confused, until she remembered what Twilight had said about him being unable to touch her without her consent. Should she? She didn't know what it was he wanted to do, for he couldn't seem to put it into words.

His claw was just an inch away and panic arose in Fluttershy once again. Even if she had found some trust in him, she just wasn't ready for physical intimacy of any kind. She yanked her hoof away, causing Discord's ears to droop in disappointment. She scooted away from him slightly and coughed.

"So, um…" she stammered, trying to find an icebreaker. "Did you, um…I mean why…what happened to your master?"

Discord smiled slightly. "He and Radiant Hope still live, though I don't see them that often anymore. Shortly after they mated, our home started to feel a little crowded. Don't get me wrong. Hope was wonderful, but I felt it was time I started off on my own. After all, I wasn't a child anymore and Master Sombra had looked after me long enough.

"So I began my journey into the world. I made slow progress as I could only travel by night and it wasn't easy finding shelter before sunrise. Eventually, I wandered into the woods up there and found

an old abandoned castle. Using my magic, I fixed the place up and declared it my home.

"Of course, ponies began to question who lived in the newly-renovated castle, so I started creating the persona of Count Discord…"

"How did you manage to convince ponies you were a count?" Fluttershy questioned.

He smirked. "Ponies will believe anything when given a sack of gold."

"Where did you get the gold?"

"I conjured it."

Her jaw dropped. "You can conjure *gold* ?!"

He waved his claw and sure enough, a pile of gold coins appeared. Fluttershy wasn't so impressed by the riches, but the impossible magic he possessed.

"Naturally, the citizens of Zebiu bought my story," Discord said, waving the gold into nonexistence. "And, being nobility, I wasn't questioned for my need for privacy. Unfortunately, ponies would notice how I wouldn't age, so every few decades I would pretend to be my own son and that my father had passed away."

"Amazing," Fluttershy whispered. "But wait. If you can rebuild a whole castle and conjure up piles of gold…why do you need to *hunt* for your food? Couldn't you just conjure blood or…" she gulped, "…a dead animal?"

He shook his head. "Even my magic has limits. I can't conjure anything alive or anything that *was* alive. I can't even conjure plants."

"Oh."

She hung her head. She had been hoping there would be a way for vampires to drink blood without killing or changing creatures.

"The next few hundred years were dull," Discord sighed, "and a bit lonely. Then one night, as I was hunting, I caught the smell of freshly spilt blood and followed it. There, lying on the ground was an unconscious unicorn mare with blood dripping down her neck. I recognized the vampire bite and knew it was only a matter of time before the mare would transform, unless she was devoured by one of the wild beasts.

"So I brought her to my castle, just as Master Sombra had brought me home as an infant. I made sure the mare was comfortable and watched over her to make sure she didn't slip away before the venom could reach her heart."

"Rarity," Fluttershy whispered. "Yes, she told me you had saved her."

He blinked. "How much have the girls told you?"

"Well, I know Rainbow Dash was a gyp—sorry, *Romane* —and she had become a wandering beggar in order to escape an arranged marriage, and that she had asked you to change her. I know Twilight's been searching for three singing vampires who had killed her parents and fiancé, and I know that Pinkie was put in an asylum by her parents, though I'm not sure she knows…"

"I think she does," Discord said solemnly. "She just doesn't want to dwell on the negative things."

"And Rarity told me about her fiancé who had tricked her, but Applejack's the only one who hasn't come to see me yet. What's *her* story?"

"Ah, yes," he sighed, shaking his head. "Poor Applejack. Her story I believe is the most tragic."

"What happened?"

He cringed. "I'm afraid it is best if you hear it from Applejack's mouth. When Pinkie arrived, we all swore we would not speak of what happened to her unless she brought it up, and she often doesn't. It's too painful an experience for her to recount."

"Oh," Fluttershy uttered, hanging her head. "I won't ask her then. But…what I don't understand is…why did you do it? I mean I know Rainbow, Pinkie and Twilight asked you to bite them, but still…why do it?"

He shrugged. "I told you. It was lonely in that castle. But let me tell you. I was surprised when Rarity insisted on staying with me, but as I had gotten used to having her around by then, I didn't object. When I met Rainbow Dash and she begged me to change her, I was against it at first, but then thought Rarity would like a female companion, as there are only so many things a mare can say to a stallion."

He chuckled. "Of course, I hadn't taken Rainbow's lack of femininity into account. Don't get me wrong! It doesn't bother me, but Rarity wasn't too keen on it at first, especially when Rainbow insisted on dressing like a stallion. Fortunately, Rarity's had almost a hundred years to get over it.

"Then I found Applejack…" He paused, and Fluttershy could tell he was close to revealing something. "Applejack…was an unusual case. You see, when vampires first change, they are in a state of uncontrollable thirst, but we didn't even need to lock the door when Applejack transformed. For some reason, she's always been the most resistant of all of us and doesn't lose control over the smell of blood."

He sighed. "She may seem a bit grumpy, but she is very sensitive, which is why we try hard not to bring up what happened to her.

"And Pinkie," he laughed, shaking his head. "Oh, Pinkie. She's quite the enigma, always so cheerful that it's hard to believe she led a troubled life. I'm sure you've noticed?"

Fluttershy nodded with a small smile.

"Now let me tell you. It was bizarre when this random mare showed up at our doorstep asking to be changed. You know what she said her reason was?" He scoffed. "She had nothing better to do!"

Discord's face fell as he cringed slightly. "Oh, but her transformation

wasn't pretty. I'm sure Twilight's told you about her…rampage?"

Fluttershy nodded.

"I can assure you, Pinkie is perfectly harmless when in her right mind…however strange that may be. Nevertheless, her midnight excursion attracted attention, and that's when Twilight and Spike came."

He frowned. "I didn't want to change her, but when she started getting sick from all the blood we had drawn from her, she insisted that I change her if she didn't pull through, that the best way for her to avenge her family was if she had the power to destroy their murderers, even if that meant becoming a monster like them. When she wouldn't heal, I had no choice."

He paused and looked sincerely at Fluttershy. "Those mares are like family to me, and I wouldn't trade their company for anything, but sometimes…I wish I wasn't responsible for their fates, at least for most of them. After all, immortality comes with many burdens, one of them being the need to drink the blood of mortals. I don't often let the girls hunt, because I don't want them to be as responsible for so many deaths."

"What about those stallions?" Fluttershy inquired.

Discord blinked in confusion. "What stallions?"

"The three stallions who were killed in the street this month. All the blood was drained from them."

His shocked expression told her this was the first time he was hearing this. "I can assure you, I had nothing to do with that, nor do I know anything about it."

He locked gaze with her as a thought occurred to him. "I understand your hesitance. The life of a vampire is not a pleasant one."

Fluttershy looked away, unsure of how to respond.

"But Fluttershy," Discord said, leaning forward slightly, "I *do* love you. How can I prove it to you?"

She gazed back at him. "Will you stop drinking blood from animals?"

He blinked. "I *need* to drink blood to survive. But if you're asking me to die for you, I would gladly…"

"No!" Fluttershy cried, standing up. "That's not what I meant!"

"Then how else can I prove my sincerity without killing myself?"

She opened her mouth as she struggled to find words. "I…I…I don't know! Please stop asking me questions I can't answer!"

"Then *don't* answer!" He wanted to take her hooves, but restrained himself. "I *will* find a way to make you see how I feel about you. I don't know how, but I won't stop trying." He paused. "But if you'd rather I stop and leave you alone forever, then say the words and I will obey." His voice lowered, and Fluttershy could've sworn he was trembling as he whispered, "I would rather be gone from your presence forever than cause you misery."

Fluttershy was frozen stiff, her mind in a haze and her tongue in a knot. His words were so passionate, so *open* . Somehow, his appearance wasn't so troublesome anymore. She paid no heed to his quirky looks and focused on his eyes, so big and pleading. He didn't seem like a bloodthirsty vampire anymore, but a lonely creature desperate for love.

But could she give that to him? Alas, it was too soon to tell, but just because she didn't love him now didn't mean she *couldn't* . Maybe, if she opened her heart a little, showed him kindness…

"Do you…" she stammered, "do you suppose you could…come to dinner, tomorrow night?"

His wings fluttered so rapidly he hit his head on the top of the window, but he was so elated he didn't care.

" *You're* inviting *me* to dinner?!" he asked with a giddy smile.

Fluttershy returned his smile kindly and nodded. It took all of Discord's willpower to stop himself from taking her in his arms and kissing her then and there! Then he calmed down as he

remembered something.

"Oh, but…I'm afraid it would be difficult coming to your place. See, my pony disguise only lasts an hour and as for dinner…well, if I eat real food, I'll…um…it's best you don't find out."

"Okay then," Fluttershy said skeptically. "How about I come to see you again?"

"That would be wonderful!"

"Oh, but my aunt might want to come along this time. With all that's happened this week, she doesn't really…hold you in high esteem."

"Oh, don't worry about her. She will be easily taken care of!"

Fluttershy's eyes widened in horror. "You don't mean…?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Like I said, we don't eat ponies! I meant I'll simply modify her memory! I could do that if I came to your place, but if your servants find me out, wiping so many memories at once is much more difficult."

"Yes, I understand. Though you should go before some pony sees you."

"Yes, yes, quite right. But before I go, may I…?"

He reached out his claw towards her face again. She glanced at it nervously and shook her head. This made him frown slightly, but he was still overcome with delight that he would see her again.

"Until tomorrow, my lady."

He released his hold on the windowsill and dropped out of sight. Fluttershy gasped in alarm and rushed to look outside for him. He shot back up into the sky, laughing merrily as he vanished into the darkness. Fluttershy was breathing heavily at what she had just done. She didn't know what had possessed her to suggest such a thing, but thanks to her accursed curiosity and sympathy, she had another dinner date with a vampire.

The vampire maidens and Spike were all in the gymnasium. Rainbow Dash insisted it was important they stay in shape in case they were ever attacked by angry vampires, so they would spar in pairs. Spike was unlucky to get Pinkie—being the only mortal, he needed to learn to defend himself especially—while Rarity and Applejack wrestled each other and Rainbow taught Twilight self-defense techniques.

"I don't see why *I* need to learn this," Twilight said as Rainbow sat on her stomach. "Couldn't I just use my magic?"

Rainbow rolled her eyes. "Sure, if you wanna go the *easy* way. And what if your opponent knows magic too? You can't always rely on your horn to get you out of a situation. Now, as you can see, if some pony is on top of you like this, they can easily punch you in the face, but you won't be able to reach theirs."

She demonstrated by stretching her hoof down to Twilight's face and brought Twilight's hoof towards hers. As Rainbow had said, she was too far away.

"First thing you gotta do when you're down like this," Rainbow continued, grabbing her forelegs, "is to tuck your elbows in like this so I can't get to your chest. That's a *really* hard position to get out of, and keep your hooves up. Also tuck in your chin and curve your back so you're head's not on the floor. Oh yeah, and keep your back hooves together and as close to your rear as possible."

"You can remember all this, but you can't remember what year Zebiu was founded?"

Rainbow ignored her as she continued, "Now, say I got a grip on your neck here and I'm trying to strangle you, which will only be possible if your opponent's a vampire too. What you gotta do is grip my foreleg, doesn't matter which one, just above the ankle here. For example, if you wanna go with by left leg, grab with your left, but it must go *behind* my other leg. Now use your other hoof to grip the upper part of my leg, but keep that inside too, and jab that elbow into my knee."

"You said this would be easy!"

"It is, if you know the technique! Now hook my back hoof."

"What?"

"Move your right hoof over my back leg and hook it with my hoof to keep me in place. Okay, now look over your right shoulder, lift up your hips, and roll me over."

"Lift up my *what* ?!"

"Oh boy," Rainbow groaned. "Here, let's switch and I'll show you how it's done."

They moved so that Twilight was sitting on Rainbow's stomach.

"Okay, pretend to strangle me."

Twilight clasped her hooves around Rainbow's neck. "I don't see how…"

Rainbow smirked as she swiftly grabbed Twilight's left foreleg with both hooves, jabbed her knee with one elbow, hooked Twilight's back hoof with hers, looked behind her and lifted her hips. Twilight shrieked as she was rolled over and they returned to their previous positions.

"See?" Rainbow said, pushing off Twilight's knees to stand. "Nothing to it."

"Where did you learn all this anyway?" Twilight asked as the pegasus helped her up.

"Fifty or something years ago, I did a little traveling out east to study the martial arts." She flexed her forelegs. "Even with super strength, a girl's gotta learn to take care of herself."

"Yeah," the lavender unicorn breathed. "I think I'll just stick with my magic for now."

"You'll see, Twilight. Magic can't solve every problem, not even

super vampire strength. At the end of the day, it's how fast you respond to a situation that counts. Besides, if you ever meet those Sirens again and they have some tricks up their sleeves, you gotta be ready."

"The only special power they have is their singing, which doesn't work on mares. I doubt I'll need to…"

She was interrupted as the door burst open and Discord came twirling in, humming merrily to himself.

"Master, you okay?" Rainbow questioned.

She shrieked as he swooped down, picked her up and waltzed her around the room, singing, " *I'm in love with a most beautiful mare…* "

"Darkness, Master!" Rarity exclaimed. "What's come over you?"

"I saw Fluttershy tonight," he sighed dreamily, ignoring Rainbow's yelp as he dropped her. "And guess what? She's coming to dinner again tomorrow night!"

"Yippee!" Pinkie exclaimed, clapping her hooves as she relieved a gasping Spike from a chokehold. "We're so happy for you, Master!"

"Ya mean she actually said… *yes* ?" Applejack asked, her face filled with disbelief and concern.

"Yes, yes, *yes* !" Discord cried happily, spinning around and hugging himself. "Oh, there's so much to do! Applejack, Pinkie, we need more food! Rarity, I'm thinking of redecorating the place, sprucing it up a little, you know? Oh, and flowers! She *loves* flowers! We need as many flowers as possible!"

"We'll get right on it, Master," Twilight saluted. "Come on, Spike. Let's go to my room and start a list."

"Can I catch my breath first?" Spike wheezed as he massaged his neck.

As every pony left the room, Discord grabbed Rarity by the shoulder.

"Rarity?" he said, his tone turning serious. "May I discuss something with you?"

"Oh," Rarity said, glancing nervously out the door. "Certainly, Master."

Discord closed the door and folded his arms. "Rarity, Fluttershy told me there's been a few…mysterious deaths in Zebiu lately. She seemed to think I or one of you girls had something to do with it."

Rarity gulped. "W-Why would she think that?"

He gave her an incredulous look. "Well, all the victims had been drained of their blood, and, interestingly enough, they were all *stallions* ."

She said nothing, but she didn't need to. The guilt she had failed to hide told Discord everything.

"Rarity," he said carefully, "I thought you were past this."

She sighed and hung her head in shame. "I'm *sorry* , Master. It's just…every time I…I think about him…how much I want to…tear him to pieces, I…I just have to take out that anger on *something* !"

"But to take it out on innocent stallions…"

She scowled. "They were *not* innocent! They wanted to use me like Tenderheart used me! I didn't just do it for me, but for *every* mare who's ever suffered at the hoof of a…"

"Rarity," he said firmly, gripping her shoulders and locking gaze with her, "those stallions *aren't* Tenderheart."

She wrenched herself away from him, a look of pain and anger in her eyes. "Show me *one* decent stallion who *doesn't* want my virginity, and I might believe you!"

She stormed out as blood started trickling down her cheeks. She didn't see Applejack standing outside the door.

I am torn between the CelestiaxSombra and Radiant HopexSombra ships in the IDW comics. I decided to go with Radiant Hope for this fic because she fit more into this universe. Besides, Celestia's more of a godly figure in this universe.

I've been taking self-defense classes, which gave me the idea for the gymnasium scene. Now I think I'll be able to write action scenes better as well as put up a fight.

Delights

"So, what can you tell me of this Count Discord?" Starlight asked her niece on the carriage ride to Discord's castle the next evening.

"W-Well," Fluttershy stammered as she tried to think of what would be safe to tell. "He, um…has an excellent sense of humor."

Starlight huffed, which told Fluttershy that this wasn't impressive to her.

"He also…plays piano."

"Oh!" her aunt exclaimed, mildly interested. "Have you mentioned you've been taking singing lessons?"

"N-No, I…"

"You should consider doing a duet this evening! Being a connoisseur of music, he'll certainly appreciate your voice! What languages does he speak?"

"I…I haven't asked."

"He must at least speak Prench! What self-respecting noblestallion wouldn't?"

"We've only spoken in Romane-ian…"

"Come now, Fluttershy! He must think you dim-witted!"

"Oh, I don't think he…"

"Ah, we're here!

The carriage came to a halt and the door was opened by Double Diamond. At first, Fluttershy thought he and Party Favor had taken them to the wrong castle. It was so much brighter, or at least the outside was. The stones had turned from black to light gray, and all the curtains were open, so light flooded the outside.

"Goodness!" Starlight uttered, glancing up at the castle in confusion. "Did he redecorate?"

"It's not as creepy as before," Party Favor muttered to Double Diamond.

"Stop mumbling, Party Favor, and knock on the door."

The unicorn stallion sighed as he used his magic to move the knocker. A minute passed and the door was opened by Rarity, who was smiling brightly. The stallions' jaws dropped at the sight of her.

"Oh, good," Rarity said, opening the door wider. "You're right on time! So good to see you again, Lady Fluttershy, and you too, Lady Starlight!" She frowned as the gentlecolt servants entered. "And what are *these* ?"

"Our servants," Starlight replied, "Party Favor and Double Diamond."

"H-Hi," Party Favor said with a nervous wave.

" *Bună* ," Double Diamond greeted.

Rarity sent them a scowl as they walked past and slammed the door in frustration.

"We were not aware you were bringing… *others* ."

"Did you really think we'd come here without proper escorts?" Starlight said with a raised eyebrow. "I will forgive the irregularity last time my niece was here, but from now on, she is not going *anywhere* alone again!"

Rarity glared at the other unicorn mare and forced a smile.

"No matter," she said through her teeth. "I'm sure we'll manage. Right this way, please."

The hallway was different too. There were several landscape and still life paintings, as well as some portraits of stallions looking like Discord's pony disguise, but with variations so they would seem like different ponies.

"Your master has elegant taste," Starlight commented, her tone suggesting slight resignation.

"Thank you," Rarity stated, thinking of nothing else appropriate to say.

The rest of the trip down the hall was silent, and long. Rarity was looking warily at the two stallions ogling at her while Starlight was glancing around, judging the décor and Fluttershy was biting her lip, trying to keep her nervousness at bay. She kept thinking something was going to go terribly wrong, something that might cause such disaster that either her aunt might never allow her near this castle again or that some pony might get hurt.

"Ah, Lady Starlight!"

Fluttershy had nearly forgotten what Discord's pony disguise looked like, so for a second she was taken aback by the handsome gray unicorn waiting in the main foyer. Her aunt seemed surprised too, for Fluttershy could see her fanning herself out of the corner of her eye.

"Oh, uh…" Starlight stammered, shaking her head. "Count Discord, I presume?"

"It is, indeed," Discord said, taking her hoof and kissing it lightly. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last, doamnă."

Starlight turned pinker at his deep, masculine voice. "Oh my."

A chill ran down Fluttershy's spine as Discord's red eyes turned their attention to her.

"And you, Lady Fluttershy," he greeted with a slight purr. "Such a delight to see *you* again."

She waited for him to kiss her hoof too, but he did not advance.

"Do I have permission to kiss your hoof, domnişoară?" he whispered.

"Oh!" Fluttershy squeaked, holding out her hoof. "Y-Yes."

Discord took his time with Fluttershy's hoof. He wanted to savor the sensation of being able to hold it. He kept his eyes on her as he raised it slowly to his lips and let them linger on her skin for three seconds, making her shiver at his touch.

She didn't know why she was feeling this way. She had always been skittish around him, but this was different. Was this because he was in a more appealing form? This thought made Fluttershy frown. Was she really that shallow?

Her sudden displeasure seemed to break the spell upon them both, for Discord finally noticed the other two guests. He dropped Fluttershy's hoof in alarm and straightened up.

"And who are these… *gentlecolts* ?"

"They're our escorts," Starlight stated, raising an eyebrow. "Is there a problem?"

Discord glanced back at Rarity, Twilight and Pinkie, who Fluttershy had only just noticed were present. Pinkie's bright smile didn't waver, Twilight shifted uncomfortably and Rarity held a murderous gaze.

"No, no!" Discord said hastily. "Not a problem! It's just…my maids aren't used to having… *stallions* over."

Starlight blinked. "You mean you don't have any *male* servants?"

"Only Spike, but he's a dragon, and not even of age."

Starlight glanced suspiciously at the three mares and cocked her head at Twilight.

"Weren't your eyes red?"

Fluttershy looked at Twilight again and she too realized her eyes had changed to a deep purple.

"You are mistaken, doamnă," Twilight said coolly. "My eyes have always been the same color. You just saw them in a different light."

Starlight stared at her for a moment and shook her head. "Yes, perhaps."

"Shall we proceed to the dining room?" Discord offered, glancing at the stallions. "Though I'm afraid the table is set for three."

"That is alright. They don't usually eat with us anyway."

"Oh. Well, then. Perhaps some of my servants can get them a bite to eat in the kitchen."

He looked at his friends. Rarity was shaking her head insistently.

"I'll do it, Master!" Pinkie piped, stepping forth.

"Me too," Twilight volunteered.

"Come on, boys!" Pinkie exclaimed, wrapping her hooves around both stallions' necks. "We're gonna have some fun!"

Party Favor and Double Diamond cringed as the pink mare dragged them out of the room, Twilight rolling her eyes as she followed them.

"They'll be alright, won't they?" Fluttershy whispered to Discord.

"Of course," he replied with an assuring smile. "I told you. We don't harm your kind."

"Fluttershy, don't whisper!" Starlight huffed. "It's unladylike!"

"That's quite alright, doamnă," Discord said, winking at Fluttershy. "I find your niece's little mutterings delightful."

Fluttershy looked away to hide her blush. Discord glanced at her neck.

"I see you still have my necklace. I thought you would've thrown it out by now."

Her cheeks turned redder as she touched the butterfly pendant. "It *is* lovely."

"I couldn't agree more."

She could tell by his seductive tone that he wasn't referring to the necklace.

"That reminds me," he said, conjuring an emerald necklace out of thin air. "I have yet to return this to you."

"I'll take that," Starlight said, levitating the necklace into her purse.

When she turned back, Fluttershy and Discord were staring meekly at each other. She was utterly bewildered by this couple's strange familiarity.

Discord coughed. "If you'll follow me…"

He led them into the dining room and Fluttershy noticed this room was different too. The vases along the walls were now filled with an assortment of flowers and instead of one small chair and a throne at the ends of the table, three chairs of the same size stood around one end. Discord pulled one out for Fluttershy to sit in and pushed it back in once she was settled. Then he immediately took his own seat at the head of the table, forgetting to do the same for Lady Starlight. The unicorn scowled at him as she was forced to seat herself.

"What would you like to drink?" Rainbow asked as she came up to the mares.

"Goodness!" Starlight shrieked. "Do you let *all* your maids walk around like *that* ?!"

She gestured toward Rainbow's black suit and tie.

"In such *masculine* attire?! It's preposterous!"

Rainbow narrowed her eyes. "I've just decided I don't like you."

"My servants," Discord interjected, holding his foreleg in front of Rainbow, "can wear whatever they please, as long as it is within the law. Tell me, doamnă. Is there a law against a mare wearing a suit?"

"Well…" Starlight stammered. "It's just… *improper* !"

"But will she get arrested? No. So I don't see the problem here."

"Do you have any chamomile tea?" Fluttershy asked Rainbow.

The multi-colored pegasus smiled. "Of course, my lady." She scowled back at Starlight. "I'll just get *you* some cyanide."

Starlight's jaw dropped as Rainbow stomped into the kitchen.

"She's joking," Discord chuckled. "I think."

"What an incredibly rude mare!" Starlight exclaimed.

"You shouldn't have insulted her." He smiled at Fluttershy. " *You* don't mind Rainbow Dash wearing a suit, do you, domnişoară?"

"Not at all," Fluttershy replied. "I think it… *suits* her."

She winced at her terrible pun, but Discord laughed.

"And here I thought you didn't have a sense of humor!"

She felt a smile pull at her lips.

"Yes, well," Starlight coughed. " *That* horrible display aside, Count Discord, do tell us how you came about this *gorgeous* castle!"

"Hmm?" uttered Discord, his focus still on Fluttershy.

"Your castle. Has it been in your family long?"

"Huh? Oh! Yes, yes. It's been in my family for…nearly seven hundred years." He turned back to Fluttershy. "Now, my dear, I wanted to ask…"

" *Our* family goes back to the 1200's! Why, my great-grandfather fought in the…"

"Yeah, sure, whatever," Discord said, waving his hoof. "Domnişoară, I understand you have an interest in music. May I ask…?"

"Oh, yes! Didn't I tell you in my letter? Fluttershy has been trained by the world-famous voice instructor, Octavia Melody!"

"Oh!" he exclaimed, looking excitedly at Fluttershy. "You can *sing* ?!"

Fluttershy glanced down at her hooves. "A little. I'm not very good."

"I'm sure you're wonderful! You really must…"

"My lord, *where* did you get these chairs?" Starlight asked in awe. "Such fine craftsmanship! Are they imported?"

At this point, Rainbow had returned with the drinks. She whispered to her master:

"I wasn't kidding about the cyanide."

"I have a better idea," Discord smirked as turned to Starlight. "Err, doamnă, you seem quite tense." He leaned forward and locked gaze with the unicorn. "Why don't you… *relax* a bit?"

Starlight opened her mouth to respond, but found she was unable to speak. Her mind was cleared of all words as she stared into the Count's swirling eyes. It didn't take long for her eyes to swirl around too. Rainbow placed her hoof over Fluttershy's eyes so she wouldn't be affected by accident.

"It's rather hard for your niece and me to get better acquainted with you constantly interrupting us," Discord said in a low, soothing voice. "Why don't you just remain quiet for the rest of the evening and eat your dinner without interference?"

Starlight nodded absent-mindedly and the spirals in her eyes disappeared. Rainbow lowered her hoof.

"What did you do to her?" Fluttershy asked worriedly.

"Forgive me, my sweet," Discord apologized, though his smirk indicated that he was not sorry for this, "but I couldn't stand her voice a jot longer. Don't worry. She won't be harmed, though the rest of the evening will be a haze to her, which means…"

He grew in size as he changed into his true form. Starlight didn't even bat an eyelash.

"Oh, yes!" he exclaimed as he stretched out his mismatched arms and legs. " *Much* better!"

"So she won't remember you like this?" Fluttershy inquired.

"No. I'll make sure of it when the evening is over. You can give the lady her drink now, Rainbow. You didn't *really* poison it, did you?"

"No," Rainbow said as she set Starlight's water down. "But I was tempted."

"Don't be so mean to Auntie Starlight," Fluttershy pleaded. "She may seem…unbearable at times, but…"

"But?" Rainbow asked with a raised eyebrow.

"She's a…" she hesitated. "She has a good…well…she *raised* me, anyway."

"Boy. And I thought *my* parents were bad."

Fluttershy opened her mouth in protest, but Rainbow was already walking away, muttering something about hoping Starlight would choke on her salad.

At first, Fluttershy wasn't happy about her aunt being in a trance the whole evening. It defeated the purpose of Discord trying to impress her. However, as the evening progressed, she found the absence of her aunt's voice…relieving. Without her comments, Fluttershy was able to talk freely with Discord, and was only now realizing this was the first time a male suitor was talking to *her* and not her aunt.

"So tell me more about your singing," Discord said as dessert was brought. "What sort of songs do you sing?"

Fluttershy blushed as she fiddled with her chocolate pudding. "Oh, um, you know, just…songs."

He smirked. "Shy when it comes to singing, eh? Or are you just shy in general?"

She chuckled slightly. "I'm really shy."

"No!" Discord exclaimed in exaggeration. "I never would've guessed! Then again, it's not like your name is Flutter *confident* !"

He winked at her, and Fluttershy burst out laughing, nearly spitting out her pudding. Starlight didn't respond to the situation, just ate her dessert quietly.

"You really have a wonderful laugh," Discord complimented with a dreamy look in his eye. "Why don't you laugh more often?"

"I don't know," she said, looking at him in awe. "I suppose I've… never had a reason to."

His wings flapped in delight at the fact that *he* was making her laugh.

"So what now?" Fluttershy asked as Rainbow Dash cleared the table of their dishes.

"The others are in the ballroom," Rainbow replied. "We set a little something up."

Discord rose from his seat and held out his eagle arm. "If the young lady would allow me to be her escort…"

Fluttershy smiled as she slid her hoof in the crook of his arm. His happiness was short-lived when he straightened up and she lost his grip on him. He looked down at her curiously. He had been aware of their difference in height, but he had expected Fluttershy to close the gap by flying up to his level.

"Sorry," she said, grinning apologetically as she took his claw in her hoof. "I forgot how tall you were."

Discord chose not to bring up his concern and put on a smile. "Right this way, domnişoară. Come on, Lady Starlight."

Starlight mechanically rose from her seat and followed them at a moderate pace. When Discord opened the double doors to the ballroom, Fluttershy gasped in awe. This room had also been transformed. The ceilings were lined with streamers tied to the chandelier, candles adorned the walls to give the room a brighter

gleam, and garlands of roses hung all around. Twilight, Party Favor and Double Diamond were sitting in the corner, listening to Pinkie Pie's tuba demonstration. Upon hearing the doors opening, the stallions turned and screamed at the sight of Discord. One look into the hypnotic depths of the draconequus' eyes and the stallions were struck into dumb silence.

"Aw, man!" Pinkie pouted. "I was hoping you wouldn't have to do that! Ponies are so *boring* when they're in a trance!"

Fluttershy glanced between Twilight, Pinkie and Discord. "Couldn't *you* two have done that?"

"Hypnotize ponies, you mean?" Twilight replied. "No. My observations have shown that hypnotic powers are a male function."

"That doesn't seem fair."

"Actually, I think it balances things out," Rarity said as she and Rainbow Dash joined them. "After all, we mares have our *own* powers of persuasion."

She demonstrated by flipping her mane at the stallions. Even in their stupor, they could not resist sighing in awe.

"Yeah, yeah," Rainbow said, waving her hoof. "We've also got *these* babies!"

She held up her hooves menacingly at the stallions. They immediately closed their mouths.

"You see," Rarity said, "there's really no need for us to have hypnotic powers."

"'Cuz we have super enticing good looks and super pony strength!" Pinkie snorted. "Not sure why males need the hypno-eyes though. Maybe it's because they're not as good-looking!"

"Ahem," Discord coughed. "Why don't we have some music? Where's Spike?"

"He's helping Applejack clear up in the kitchen," Rarity replied.

"They'll be along."

"I'm sure they won't mind if we start without them," Twilight said. "Pinkie, Rainbow, Rarity, why don't you play us something?"

"Now's your chance to sing for us, Fluttershy!" Discord exclaimed.

"Oh no," Fluttershy muttered, her mane falling over her eye. "I can't…"

"Please?" he asked, giving her a pleading look.

"I…I've never sung in front of so many ponies before…"

"You don't have to sing if you don't want to, darling," Rarity assured her as she sat at the piano.

"I can sing," Twilight said, standing up to join the others.

Twilight had a pretty voice that mixed well with Rainbow's guitar, Rarity's piano and Pinkie's harp (they had begged her to play something more docile). Fluttershy sat quietly with Discord, Starlight, Double Diamond and Party Favor as they listened, though the last three didn't seem to be paying attention. Pinkie glanced between Fluttershy and Discord, knowing the latter couldn't keep his eyes off the pretty pegasus.

"Why don't you two dance?" she suggested.

"What?!" Fluttershy squeaked.

"Oh, no, no, no!" Discord insisted, clearing his throat.

"Come on!" Pinkie urged.

She jumped away from the harp, grabbed hold of the couple and pulled them onto the dancefloor.

"I can't…" Fluttershy stammered.

"This really isn't necessary…" Discord protested.

But Pinkie had already shoved them together so that they were hoof

to hoof.

"Don't be shy, Discord!" she chuckled. "That's *Fluttershy's* job!"

She bounced away so she could return to her harp. Every pony was looking at the couple expectantly. Discord stared down at Fluttershy, and she up at him. She looked down at her hooves and he looked away. It was hard to tell who was more nervous.

"Fluttershy, I…" he stammered, biting his lip. "I have a confession to make. I…I've never actually… *danced* before."

"N-Neither have I," Fluttershy murmured. "I mean…I've had lessons, but…I've never actually danced with a…a partner before. At least," she blushed, "not a…not a…"

He smiled in understanding. "Then this will be a new experience for both of us. I *have* attended a few balls though, so I believe it's something like…" He reached out to touch her but hesitated. "May I?"

"Oh. Yes, you may."

He took her right hoof in his claw and placed his paw on her waist. Fluttershy wasn't sure how this was going to work with their height difference, until he lifted her off the floor, making her shriek, so that she was flat against his chest. She gripped his lion arm for balance and glanced up at him in fear.

"I won't drop you," he whispered. "Now, I believe, we twirl around, like this."

He stepped to his left and began swinging her around the room. Fluttershy was amazed at how light she felt in his arms, but then again, she was much smaller than him. Discord laughed joyfully, for this was the closest he had ever been to her since their first meeting. As Fluttershy started becoming more comfortable and turned her attention away from how high she was off the ground, she laughed along with him.

Spike and Applejack entered the room and stopped in their tracks as they took in the scene before them.

"Wow," said Spike with a smile. "Looks like things are going well."

"I…don't believe it," Applejack murmured.

The music and the couple currently dancing put Spike in the mood to dance as well. Unfortunately, the mare he wanted to ask was sitting at the piano. He glanced sideways at the only vampire mare who wasn't preoccupied.

"So, what do you think?" he asked. "Should we join them?"

Applejack looked down at him in shock. "Uh…I'm not sure that's a…"

"Come on, AJ! Have a little fun once in a while!"

He grabbed her hoof before she could protest and hastened her to the dancefloor. Since he was shorter than her, it seemed impossible to waltz. He lifted her hoof over his head and spun beneath it, making Applejack chuckle.

"Okay, okay! But *I'm* leading!"

He shrieked as she lifted him up, but laughed as she spun him around playfully. Those who watched them and weren't hypnotized couldn't help but laugh too.

"How cute!" Fluttershy giggled.

"Indeed, my dear," Discord said, wriggling his eyebrows at her. "Your adorableness is too much to bear."

She glanced at him curiously as he dramatically put his paw to his chest. "Oh, my heart! It's killing me!" He grinned. "Oh, that's right. I'm undead."

Fluttershy couldn't stop giggling. Her cheeks ached from how high the corners of her mouth had risen. She couldn't remember a time she had felt this giddy, and it was strange feeling this way with a creature who had wanted to drink her blood over a week ago.

Discord was entranced by the jubilant beauty in his arms. Her laugh

echoed in his ears, making them flap gleefully. Her smile brought warmth to his un-beating heart, and her eyes…if he didn't know any better, he'd say *she* was the one with hypnotic powers.

As the song reached its close, he surprised her by twirling her under his arm. He silently used his magic to make sure she wouldn't fall. When he brought her back in, he slowly moved her into a dip, so that they could gaze at each other properly. Fluttershy's face was flushed from the exercise and she was panting heavily.

"Oh my," she breathed.

She gasped as his paw gripped her back, arching it upwards.

"Not bad for my first time, eh?" he said in a voice so low it made her shiver.

His eyes wandered to her lips, which were open to release every heaving breath. They were almost welcoming him, and despite himself, he was leaning towards them.

Fluttershy stiffened when she realized what he was trying to do and flung her hoof to his mouth.

"I think we should take a break," she said quickly.

Discord sighed as he brought them both up. "Yes, right."

He set her down and they returned to their seats by the instruments. Some of the others had decided to rest too, but Rarity and Pinkie continued playing the piano and harp quietly.

"What *did* happen to your eyes?" Fluttershy asked Twilight as she sat beside her.

"Our eyes turn red when we're feeling most savage," the lavender unicorn explained, "particularly when we're thirsty or angry. Our eyes *always* change when we transform. As for me, I was still in my newborn stage. The charm Zecora gave me managed to stop me from changing, but it didn't eradicate my thirst completely."

"I notice you aren't wearing it."

"I had to take it off. Garlic isn't as dangerous to newborn vampires. It can suppress them, but not harm them. Now that I'm a full-fledge vampire, it's dangerous for me to wear it."

Fluttershy looked up at Discord. "Your eyes don't change. At least not when you're angry or thirsty."

"I think we've already established that I'm different from normal vampires," he explained, scooching closer to her. "Then again, I've had no cause to be angry or thirsty around you." He looked away guiltily. "Since our first meeting, that is."

Fluttershy gripped her neck as she had a frightening thought. "You mean…you can still get… *thirsty* ? I mean…when you're with *me* ?"

He frowned as he understood her concern. "I would never harm you, if that's what you mean. I've lived long enough to learn self-control."

"And as I said," Twilight whispered, "he can't touch you without your permission."

"What about all of *you* ?" Fluttershy asked abruptly.

Rarity's hooves pounded on the piano and Pinkie's harp string snapped. All the mares were silent.

"You don't have to worry about them!" Spike exclaimed, waving his claw. "They're as harmless as sheep, especially AJ here!"

He gripped Applejack's hoof and she looked away in response.

"It's true," Twilight nodded. "I'm still new to this, so I can't be sure how I'll fair without the charm now. Rarity and Rainbow have been at this for a while, and Pinkie…well…" She leaned towards Fluttershy and murmured, "After what happened when she first changed, she hasn't hurt any pony since."

"But why is Applejack…?" Fluttershy started to question.

"The most controlled? Well, my theory on vampires when they change is that all their characteristics are enhanced and what they become as vampires depends on what they were as mortals. For

instance, I think those Sirens I encountered were accomplished singers before and vampirism gave them their special powers. In our case, Rainbow is the strongest of us all because she was strong in life. Pinkie is the fastest, Rarity is the most beautiful, and, if my theory is correct, my magic is the most powerful. Next to Master Discord's, of course. So, because Applejack was so stubborn before she was…"

"I'm not listening to this," Applejack said gruffly as she stood from her seat.

"I didn't mean to…" Fluttershy called to the orange mare as she left the ballroom.

"Don't take it personally," Rainbow snorted. "She does that a lot."

"This party's getting gloomy," Pinkie groaned. "Let's crank things up a notch!"

She and Rarity started the music again and Discord asked Fluttershy for another dance. She could not deny she was having a delightful time. Whenever they took a break from dancing, they would talk. He would ask her about the flowers she liked and was amazed how much she knew about them. She would not only list their scientific names, but their lifespans, where they were most commonly grown, and whether they were perennial or annual.

"And tulips?" Discord asked, leaning on his paw in interest.

"You mean the *tulipa* ," Fluttershy giggled excitedly. "They're perennial, and even though they're popular in the Neightherlands, they actually originated in Turkey."

"You don't say!"

"And they're quite easy to grow. Just plant them a few weeks before winter and they'll be blooming in the spring! Why, if I ever had a garden of my own I'd be sure to…"

She paused as she locked eyes with Discord.

"What's wrong?" he asked in concern.

"Nothing, I…" she stammered, looking down at her hooves with a small smile. "It's just that…no pony's ever really been interested in this sort of thing. Or *anything* I say, for that matter."

"Really?" he said, raising an eyebrow. "That's a shame. You have quite a lot to say."

She gazed up at him in amazement. "Yes. I guess I do."

The evening went on until Fluttershy realized it was nearly midnight and that she and the others, whom she had momentarily forgotten, should be getting home. Discord led them all to the door and gave the hypnotized ponies a few last commands.

"Now, when I snap my fingers, you will forget all that happened tonight. Rather, you will remember having a wonderful time here and that I was a very hilarious host."

"Discord!" Fluttershy scolded, biting back her laughter.

"You don't think I was humorous, my dear?" he smirked teasingly. "Or was all that laughter just to be polite?"

She blushed. "Just…don't make her consent to…you know."

"I wasn't going to, my dear. Though it doesn't hurt for her to have a good opinion of me."

He snapped his fingers and quickly changed into a pony. Starlight, Double Diamond and Party Favor blinked out of their trance.

"Well, it's been a pleasure, Lady Starlight," Discord said with a bow. "I hope you will consider coming again sometime."

"Oh, uh," Starlight stammered as she curtsied. "Yes, yes. Would the evening after tomorrow do?"

"Splendidly. I will see you then." He smiled at Fluttershy and bowed. "My lady."

Fluttershy curtsied in return, unable to conceal the redness in her cheeks.

"Come along, dear," Starlight ordered.

Once they were back in their carriage, Starlight was glancing down at herself, her face filled with confusion.

"Well that was a… *interesting* evening." She put her hoof to her head. "But that horrid he-mare must've put something in my drink! Everything's a haze!" She looked curiously at her niece. "What are you smiling about?"

Fluttershy didn't think it possible that her face could flush any deeper. She coughed as she straightened up.

"Nothing, Auntie. I just…had a good time."

"Yes," Starlight nodded. "You and the Count seemed to…get along well. Tell me, dear. Yesterday, you wouldn't have anything to do with the Count. Today, you're…well, you're *smiling* ! What has caused this sudden change in behavior?"

Fluttershy glanced out the window. "I wish I knew, Auntie. I wish I knew."

I couldn't think of a horse pun for Turkey, cuz it's already an animal name! Also, "buna" means "hello."

Surprise

I had to give up on NaNoWriMo halfway into November and finals came up so quickly I've been too busy writing essays to write for fun. I know this is short, but I figured you deserved an update after all this time.

The next few days were utter bliss for Discord as Fluttershy would join him for dinner every other night. The second time she came over, she insisted that Discord not hypnotize her aunt, but after fifteen minutes neither of them could stand her anymore, so Fluttershy didn't complain when Discord put his eyes into motion. She found she couldn't converse with him otherwise.

With the awkwardness between them almost completely evaporated, Discord and Fluttershy were able to open up to each other more. Fluttershy was free to talk about her favorite flowers and animals, though Discord remained silent listening to the latter, while he would discuss the places he had been, which Fluttershy was most interested in. He had even finished showing her the rest of the castle, including all the bedrooms.

"Why do you all sleep in coffins?" Fluttershy had asked.

"We're undead," Discord had replied with a shrug, "which technically means we're the dead come back to life. I call it cruel irony."

One could imagine her surprise at seeing Discord's room, which had made her extremely dizzy.

"Sorry," he had chuckled, shutting the door. "I have a…unique perspective on things."

Fluttershy was also getting better acquainted with the servants. Rarity would talk about fashion and she insisted she make a special gown for the mortal mare. Twilight would answer any questions Fluttershy had about vampires or practically anything, for she was

well-read, and Spike would answer anything on dragons. Rainbow Dash would show Fluttershy some of her self-defense moves, always using a reluctant Twilight to demonstrate. As for Pinkie, she could talk for several hours without taking a breath and made the most delicious treats.

The only vampire who hadn't warmed up to the mortal mare yet was Applejack. Fluttershy didn't know why the orange mare was constantly avoiding her. Whenever she did see her, she always had a grim expression on her face and would stare at Fluttershy as if she had done something wrong. She had asked the others about this, but they had all given the same answer:

"We're not supposed to talk about it."

Meanwhile, Discord was falling more and more in love with the sweet pegasus each day. He had never met a pony so kind, so caring, so appreciative of the littlest things in the world. His feelings had become than just a product of the mating instinct. While he still found her beautiful, he was now more interested in her gentle nature. In fact, it was all her enchanting personality traits which made her even more beautiful in his eyes, and he considered himself honored to be permitted to be in her presence.

If only she could trust him more. While she was starting to open up, he could tell there were some things she wasn't telling him. For instance, every time he asked about her childhood, she would become silent. He knew her parents had died when she was young, but she never discussed more than that. She also would not tell him why she was so reluctant to let him touch her. True, she wasn't afraid to be close to him anymore, but their touches were never more intimate than his paw clutching her hoof. Even when they danced, he could feel her pushing against him, trying to put some distance between them.

He respected her, of course, and didn't wish to do anything to make her uncomfortable, but his growing desire for her didn't make it easy to restrain himself. He longed to touch her more intimately, not just hold her hoof for a few seconds at a time (she would have pulled away by then). She had sworn she didn't find him frightful anymore, so why was she still so hesitant? Was she having second thoughts?

He decided to approach the subject on their fifth evening together as he took her out on the terrace.

"Fluttershy?" he asked as they sat down on a stone bench together.

"Yes?" Fluttershy replied, looking up at him with a small smile.

He was silent for a moment, as he was admiring how her face shimmered in the moonlight. He cleared his head with a quick shake.

"I've b-been m-meaning to ask," he stammered as he slowly brought her hoof to his chest. "D-Do you… *enjoy* my company?"

"Oh, yes," she said, her smile growing wider. "Yes, yes. I've had such a wonderful time with you. *All* of you."

"Even me?"

" *Especially* you! Oh." She blushed at how quickly and eagerly she had admitted that. "I-I mean…it's been fun and…"

She stopped short when she realized how close Discord's face was to hers. She shivered as he gently brushed his claw against her cheek.

"Fluttershy," he whispered, "I know it may be too soon, but I was wondering if I could…"

They both jumped when they heard a twig snap nearby. Discord straightened up and turned sharply, his ears folding back and his eyes narrowing. A doe was grazing on the edge of the wood. Fluttershy gasped in awe.

"Oh, how adorable!" she whispered.

Her smile vanished as she gazed up at Discord. His expression had not changed. In fact, he was lowering himself into a crouch, his hair standing on the back of his neck.

"Oh no, Discord!" Fluttershy cried in horror. "Stop!"

But Discord did not seem to hear her. She could see his claws springing out of his paw.

"Discord, please! Don't!"

She leapt onto him, knocking him to the ground. Alerted by Discord's yelp, the doe raced off into the forest.

"I'm sorry!" Fluttershy squeaked, jumping off of Discord. "I'm so sorry, I…"

"No need," Discord grunted as he lifted himself up. "Though for future reference, it's dangerous to attack a predator when he is about to…"

He trailed off when he saw the terror in her face. It was only then that he realized what he had almost made her witness.

"I…I'm sorry. Forgive me, I…I haven't dined in a while and sometimes it's hard to control myself when…"

"I know," Fluttershy choked, turning away from him. "I-It's your…n-nature."

He felt a twinge of guilt. Now he understood why she was still reluctant towards him.

"Fluttershy," he pleaded, taking a cautious step forward, "you have to understand, I'm a…"

"Vampire, yes," she said in a cracked voice. "You feed on blood. Yes, I know."

"I have no choice! If I don't drink blood, I will…"

"Die, I know."

"And I find it unethical to feed on ponies, so…"

"You feed on animals. I know this, Discord."

"Then why is that so difficult for you to accept?"

She turned to face him, and his heart ached at seeing tears form in her eyes. "I just…well…when you…you know…do they…do they… *suffer* ?"

He blinked. "I don't know the answer to that."

She looked away from him again.

"By that, I mean I can't read their minds! But…when I…you know, I hypnotize them so they won't feel a thing."

She peered over her shoulder with hopeful eyes. "So it doesn't…hurt them?"

He bit his lip. "Well…some…come out of the trance before…but it's usually over before they know it!"

He couldn't tell if this information had made things better or worse, for Fluttershy's only response was the hanging of her head. Discord moved around her so he could speak to her face.

"Fluttershy," he said tenderly, cautiously holding out his paw. "I know…I know I'm a monster and…"

Fluttershy looked up at him in surprise. "What? No, no! I didn't say that!"

"Yes, you did. The first time you came to dinner."

She frowned. "Oh. I…I forgot about that. I didn't mean it though! I…I don't think you're a monster."

His ears perked up, as did the corners of his mouth. "You really think so, Fluttershy?"

"I *know* so." She touched his paw and locked gaze with him. "From how you've treated me these past few weeks, I know that…you could never hurt me."

"I *wouldn't* ," Discord said, clutching her hoof in his paw and claw. "These past few weeks with you have been the most wonderful of my existence! Since I met you I've been… *happy* . I haven't felt that

way in a long, long time."

His smile wavered as his nerves started to take over. "I just wish…I had *hoped* that…you would feel the same way by now."

Fluttershy lowered her head and sighed solemnly. "I *do* like you, Discord, but…I don't…"

"You don't *love* me."

His eyes were sad, but his face was etched with comprehension. Fluttershy gave a small nod.

"I just…need more time."

He nodded in return and released her hoof. "I know."

"Discord? Are you al—?"

"Oh, don't worry about me!" he said, waving his paw. "Remember, I'm immortal. I have all the time in the world to wait."

She smiled slightly. "I'm glad you understand. Now, um, it's getting a bit late and…"

"Of course."

Discord bowed and allowed Fluttershy to go back inside and fetch her aunt. Once she was out of sight, he sank back onto the bench, placed his head in his paw and claw and sighed. He sat in silence for a long while until Rarity and Twilight came out to check on him.

"Are you alright, Master?" the latter asked.

"Fine, fine," the draconequus grumbled.

"Did something happen with Fluttershy?" Rarity inquired worriedly. "She looked pretty grim when she came back inside." She gasped. "She didn't…break things off with you, did she?!"

"No, no. Our relationship hasn't shattered." He sighed. "It's not going anywhere either."

"What do you mean?" Twilight questioned. "I thought you two were getting along."

"Me too!" Rarity exclaimed. "These past few weeks, you've been happier than I've ever seen you, Master! And I've known you for a hundred odd years!"

"Don't get me wrong," Discord groaned. "These past few weeks with Fluttershy have been glorious, but…she still can't get past the fact that I feed off animals' blood for survival, and you know how much she sympathizes with animals."

"Oh my. That *is* a problem."

He stood up and began to pace. "If only I could make her see how much I care about her, that I would give up being a vampire if I could…"

"But you can't change who you are, Master," Twilight reminded him.

"I know! But…if I had the chance to change my…needs, I'd take it! But how can I prove that to her?"

"Perhaps you should do something for her, Master," Rarity suggested. "Like a gift of some sorts."

"Of course!" Twilight agreed. "Something that appeals to her interests, to show her how well you know her."

"And that you appreciate her for more than just her beauty!"

"Now let's see. She likes plants and animals…"

"Scratch animals off the list!" Discord exclaimed. "They wouldn't come within a hundred meters of me!"

"So plants then," Rarity said, rubbing her chin in thought.

"Well, I can't make plants with my magic, and I can't just give her any plants. She's a special mare, she deserves a special…"

He gasped excitedly as an idea sprung into his head. "Twilight! Do

you have any books on flowers?!"

"Err, yes," Twilight replied. "I have several books on botany in my r __"

But he was off before she could finish. Discord then spent the next hour searching through Twilight's books, until he found a page describing just what he was looking for.

"Perfect!"

He ripped out the page, making a mental note to apologize to Twilight later, and whizzed downstairs.

"EVERYONE!"

His six servants responded immediately to their master's call and joined him in the main foyer.

"Something wrong, Master?" Applejack asked.

"Have the cupcakes taken over the world?!" Pinkie shrieked.

Everyone stared at her for a long moment until Discord cleared his throat.

"Girls, Spike, I'm going away for a while and I'm leaving Twilight in charge."

"Wait, what?" Twilight uttered in surprise. "Going away?"

As Discord materialized a suitcase in which he packed random things he pulled out of nowhere, he explained his plan and showed the book page to his servants.

"You ripped a page out of my books?!" Twilight screamed in horror.

"I'll put it back when I'm done with it," Discord murmured as he snapped his suitcase shut.

"I think it's a splendid idea, Master!" Rarity cheered. "She'll love it!"

"But it'll take you days to get there!" Rainbow exclaimed. "And days

to come back!"

"She's right, Master," Twilight confirmed. "Even with your speed, four thousand six hundred and fifty-one kilometers is quite a distance."

"Don't forget you can't travel in the sun!"

"Which is why I'm bringing the carriage," Discord said, zapping on his travel cloak. "When the sun rises, I'll take shelter in there."

"But what if you're attacked by robbers?"

"You underestimate me, Rainbow."

"I mean during the day! An empty carriage is something robbers would check out. What if you have to go outside to fight them off?"

"The Master can handle himself, Dashie!" Pinkie snorted. "He's a grown vampire!"

"Still, you need some pony to come along and make sure you don't get fried. And when I say some pony, I mean me."

Discord shook his head. "No, Rainbow. I'm making this trip for Fluttershy. I must do it alone."

"But if I come, I can pull the carriage during the day and we can make it there quicker."

He tapped his chin to ponder and then finally nodded in agreement. "Very well, Rainbow. You can join me."

"Yes!" Rainbow cried, jumping into the air. "It's been so long since I've gone adventuring!"

"But Master," Twilight said, "if you're going to be gone for a week at least, how are we going to feed?"

"I could always…" Spike started to say as he pointed to his arm.

"No!" Applejack cried before hastily clearing her throat. "I mean…

even with you and Rainbow gone, Master, Spike's not gonna be enough to feed all of us, especially if for some reason you're held up or…"

"Yes, I know," Discord nodded gravely. "In light of the circumstances, I will allow you girls to hunt for yourselves while I'm gone. Just be careful and remember," he darted his eyes at Rarity, "stay clear of ponies. Should Fluttershy or any pony else ask, I'm away on business. I want Fluttershy to be surprised."

The others agreed and said their goodbyes as Discord and Rainbow departed from the castle. Discord snapped his fingers, making the black carriage shrink into his pocket before he turned into an eagle and flew up to join Rainbow Dash, who had taken her bat form so she could fly faster.

"You must *really* love this girl if you're risking burning up in the sun for her," she snorted.

As they passed over Lady Starlight's mansion, Discord smiled as he thought of the beautiful pegasus currently sleeping inside.

"You have no idea, Rainbow."

Missing

You didn't expect me to work on Christmas, did you?

On the third day of Count Discord's absence, Lady Starlight had invited Lord Fancy Pants to tea. He was a refined white unicorn in his late thirties with wispy blue hair and blue eyes. Today he wore a well-pressed suit and a monocle over his eye. He and Lady Starlight were sipping their cups and conversing in the west drawing room, while Fluttershy sat across from them, gazing wistfully out the window.

"A summer home in Normanedy, you say?" Starlight said with interest.

"Oh, yes," Fancy Pants responded. "I bought the place last year. Charming little villa, not too far from the seaside."

"Oh, it sounds lovely! Fluttershy *adores* the seaside. Don't you, dear?"

Fluttershy felt there was no point in mentioning that she had never seen any body of water larger than a river.

"Perhaps you ladies could come and see it sometime next summer."

"Oh, we'd be delighted! Won't we, Fluttershy?"

Again, Fluttershy chose to remain silent. Now that Discord wasn't there to silence her aunt, there was no use trying to get a word in.

Since Rarity had come to inform her that Discord was currently away on "business," Fluttershy had been feeling…empty. This tea with another suitor only reminded her of how much she craved Discord's company. When she had dined with him, he wouldn't spend the entire meal conversing with her aunt. No, he would focus all his attention on Fluttershy and ask her opinion on things, not her aunt's.

It had been refreshing to be included in something, to be granted a voice. She also missed hearing what Discord had to say, missed his jokes which had made her laugh more than she had ever laughed in her life. For the first time, she had had a friend who wasn't a pet.

She knew Discord wouldn't be gone forever, but after seeing him almost every day for the past few weeks, it was like everything in her life had become…dull. Or rather, it had always been dull. She had just never fully realized it before. Her time with Discord had given her a taste of excitement. Now that he was gone, even if for a short while, so was the excitement.

"So is it true that you ladies have been dining with the Count Discord as of late?"

Upon hearing his name, Fluttershy snapped out of her thoughts and turned to the stallion who had uttered it.

"Now how did you hear about that?" Starlight questioned.

"Word gets around," Fancy Pants said nonchalantly. "It's true, then?"

"Oh, yes! He's had us over for dinner at least five times these past few weeks."

"Really?" the lord exclaimed, adjusting his monocle. "So you've actually been *in* his castle?"

"Yes, lovely place! Quite enormous!"

"It looks as if it could touch the sky!"

Fancy Pants turned to the pegasus in surprise, as this was the first time she had spoken all afternoon. Fluttershy was surprised herself. Starlight, however, didn't seem to acknowledge that her niece had uttered a sound.

"Been in his family for seven centuries, he says," she said with an ostentatious laugh. "Very rustic, yet kept in excellent condition!"

"Fascinating," Fancy Pants murmured. "I'm surprised he even let you up there. Count Discord is known to be a…"

"Recluse, I know. I can't imagine why. Perhaps his servants embarrass him."

"What's he like?"

"He's a handsome stallion around…" She frowned and looked at her niece. "Darling, do you remember how old he said he was?"

Fluttershy bit her lip. "Um…"

"Well, he looked young. I'd say late twenties or early thirties at most."

"Did he explain to you why he seemed particularly interested in your company?" Fancy Pants inquired.

"Well…" Starlight uttered, glancing at Fluttershy. "When one has an attractive niece of marriageable age, and stallions," she winked at the lord, "being what they are…"

"Ah, I see."

Fancy Pants looked at the young pegasus in thought.

"Not that any arrangements have been made!" Starlight hastily insisted. "By that, I mean he hasn't proposed!"

"Actually, Auntie…" Fluttershy started to say.

"But who knows? My niece is quite the catch, after all."

"Well," Fancy Pants cleared his throat. "If the Count is so…taken with your niece, perhaps she can persuade him to come to a dinner party I'm hosting next week. I often invite him to my little soirees, but he always declines."

"Oh, I'm sure we can put a word in for you. Unfortunately, he's currently away on business, but he should be back…Fluttershy, when did that maid say he'd be back?"

"She didn't," Fluttershy croaked.

"He should be here for your party. Perhaps we can convince Count Trenderhoof to come too."

The lord nearly spat out his tea. "Surely you don't mean Count Trenderhoof of Bullarest?"

"The very same! He is coming into town on business and will be staying with us for a few weeks."

"I say!" He turned back to Fluttershy. "You seem to be attracting the biggest names in Tramplevania, domnişoară!"

"Of course, Count Trenderhoof has yet to meet my daughter, but he did seem interested when I mentioned her in my letter." She smirked at the lord. "I imagine soon all the stallions will be fighting for her hoof."

Fancy Pants blinked. "Careful with how you choose words, doamnă. You make your niece sound like some prize to be won."

Starlight's smile wavered. "Oh, um, I only meant…"

"Though I have no doubt she will find a suitable husband before her next birthday."

He gave Fluttershy a friendly smile, which made her tilt her head in confusion. She had never seen this side of Fancy Pants before. Starlight seemed to take this silent exchange as a spark of romance and stood up.

"Excuse me, a moment. I have to…powder my muzzle."

She whispered something to Double Diamond as she exited the room. With the exception of the servant standing in attendance, Fancy Pants and Fluttershy were alone. The latter looked down at her teacup, avoiding the stallion's gaze.

"Is your aunt telling the truth?"

Fluttershy fiddled with her cup, not looking at him as she replied, "About what?"

"That Count Discord…has a fancy towards you?"

She raised her head in panic. "I, uh…"

"So he does?"

She glanced back down as her face turned beet red. Fancy Pants leaned forward slightly so he could see her face.

"And you?" he asked gently. "What do you think of him?"

She brushed her mane forward so that it would cover her face. Fancy Pants could not help but chuckle.

"No need to hide, domnişoară. I will keep your secret."

She looked nervously at Double Diamond, who turned his back to them and pretended to admire the wallpaper. Fluttershy then gulped and took a deep breath.

"Y-Yes, he…h-has mentioned that he…w-well…"

Fancy Pants smiled. "He loves you."

She nodded slowly.

"Do you love him?"

She closed her eyes. "I don't know. I…I *like* him, but…we haven't known each other for long…"

"And yet he is away and you miss him."

She looked up at him in surprise.

"Don't think I haven't noticed your forlorn glances out the window." He sighed as his face grew solemn. "I wear that look every time I think of my late wife."

Fluttershy's heart sank guiltily. She had forgotten the lord was a widower.

"Fleur and I met in Maris," he said, putting on that forlorn gaze he

had described. "I was on holiday, and even though I'd only known her for a few days, I was enchanted. When I returned to Zebiu, my heart ached for her. We wrote to each other, but it wasn't enough. Eventually, we decided to marry. Unfortunately, after two years of marriage, she died in childbirth. The child didn't survive either."

There was a long silence, and Fluttershy did her best to stop herself from crying.

"I'm sorry," she choked.

He gave her a warm smile. "It's alright. I miss her, but it may be time to move on."

Then he briefly glanced over his shoulder at the door, leaned forward and whispered, "Don't think I don't know what your aunt is trying to pull here. I've been through the trials of matchmaking and courtship. What puzzles me is why your aunt is looking at so many suitors when there's already a match who's not only of admirable state, but has captured her niece's heart?"

He paused at seeing Fluttershy's uneasiness. "I apologize. You are fond of him, at least."

Fluttershy thought back on all the times she had spent with Discord and grinned slightly. "Yes. I guess I am."

"So sorry to keep you waiting, Lord Fancy Pants!" Starlight bubbled as she reentered the room. "I hope you didn't find my niece's company too tiresome."

"Oh, not at all," Fancy Pants said, winking at Fluttershy.

The pegasus was feeling much more comfortable now that she had talked about her feelings with someone. It was also relieving to know that Fancy Pants had no romantic intentions towards her. That was one less suitor to worry about. Besides, however she felt about Discord, she didn't think he would take the news that he had competition lightly.

For some reason, this questionably dark thought made her smile even wider.

Her face lit up when he showed her the gift. She flung his arms around him and rained kisses all over his face. He was about to bring her lips to his when she cried out in a raspy voice:

"Master, wake up!"

Discord sat up with a start, bumping his head on the roof of the black carriage. Rainbow Dash was leaning in towards him.

"The sun has set," she informed him. "Time to get up."

"Right," Discord muttered, massaging his head. "Where are we?"

"The edge of the Coltgo jungle, I think."

"Ah, so we're nearly there!"

He leaped out of the carriage and snapped his fingers. Rainbow dashed out before the coach was reduced to the size of a kumquat.

"How many times have I told you to warn me whenever you do that?!" she shouted accusingly as he tucked the carriage into his pocket.

"Sorry, but I'm eager to get to that waterfall before sunrise."

He glanced around at the brilliant green vegetation in awe. He inhaled the sweet tropical scent and sighed.

"It's been so long since I've been to Zebrica. I seem to recall there being more trees."

"It *is* pretty cool," Rainbow nodded. "You always told me the Coltgo jungle was one of the most exotic places in the world, and you weren't kidding!"

"So, do you want to take the sky path or the scenic route?"

Rainbow glanced down as her stomach grumbled. "How about we get some grub first? We've been traveling a lot lately."

"Very well. You ever had panther, before?"

"Does it taste anything like tiger?"

"A bit, though it has much more protein."

"I *do* like my protein."

"Well, with any luck, we'll come across one. Activate stealth mode!"

She saluted. "Roger, captain!"

Discord took the form of a deer while Rainbow ducked behind a tree. She couldn't stop smiling as he walked casually through the jungle and she followed him through the underbrush.

"This is great!" she whispered excitedly. "The two of us hunting in the woods together, just like hold times! Only this time, we're in the jungle! We're like a couple of Europonyean explorers! Like Livingstallion and Stable!"

Discord smirked. "I *have* missed your company on these hunts."

"Then how come you never let me come with you anymore?"

He frowned and pretended to focus on the path ahead.

"Seriously, Master. You didn't really care about either of us hunting before, until Pinkie came. Is it because she went haywire during her transformation? Because you know we know not to go after ponies. So what's wrong with us hunting animals?"

He stopped and looked up at her with serious eyes. "It's not just the fact that you'd be responsible for all those deaths, but when Pinkie lost herself, she nearly exposed all of us. If it hadn't been for Twilight's discreetness, we would've had to leave Tramplevania. Don't you see? I don't want you hunting so often because I can't risk you girls being discovered. I can at least disguise myself, but even in your bat forms, you girls would be recognizable. Do you have any idea what would happen if some pony saw you standing over an animal carcass with enormous bat wings sprouting from your back?! They'd begin rallying the villages with torches, pitchforks, rifles…"

"So? That stuff can't hurt us."

"Wooden stakes, garlic…"

Rainbow gulped. "Point taken. Still, you act like we can't take care of ourselves."

"It's not that I don't trust you to take care of yourselves. I just…" He sighed. "You asked me to bite you, Rainbow. Since then, I've felt responsible for you, as I have been for Rarity and all the others. You're like my family and should anything happen to you…it would be my fault."

She said nothing. She couldn't. It wasn't in her repertoire to talk about her feelings. Discord knew this, but he didn't need to hear it from her mouth to know she was touched.

And she was. Since her own father had betrayed her, Discord had taken his place in a way. He cared for Rainbow and, unlike her real father, Discord allowed her to be herself. He had always said she and the others were like family to him, but now that he was expressing it fully, Rainbow couldn't help but be moved.

The silence was broken when thy both heard a low growl in the bushes. Discord raised his cloven hoof to his lips and continued down the path as if nothing had happened. Rainbow crouched down low as she watched him calculatingly while also keeping an eye on their surroundings. She sniffed the air and froze.

"Master, wait! It's not a panther, it's a…"

An enormous figure with large wings pounced out of the bushes, hissing loudly. But Discord saw the predator in time to change back and push it down. He growled at the creature pinned under his paw and claw. He didn't have time to see what he was dealing with, for at that moment another creature jumped out at him. Rainbow crashed into its side before it could reach her master.

"Back off, buddy!" she hissed as she opened her bat wings to make herself look bigger. "You chose your prey *very* poorly!"

Rainbow ate her words as she was zapped by her adversary and

was sent flying backwards into a tree. Discord's opponent tried the same, but he quickly shielded himself with his magic. In the light of the blast, he got a better look at the creature under him. It was a female vampire with a gleaming purple coat and a shiny blue mane. Her horn illuminated again and both of their eyes widened in familiarity.

"Discord?"

"Hope?"

"Discord?" said a male voice.

The draconequus turned to see the other vampire, who was a gray unicorn stallion with hair as black as night.

"Master?"

"You *know* them?" Rainbow demanded as she struggled to rise.

"They're my old master and mistress," Discord explained, "Sombra and Radiant Hope."

"Well, well, well," Sombra chuckled as he folded his bat wings. "After all these years."

"It's splendid to see you again, Discord," Hope smiled. "But I'd appreciate it if you got off me."

"Oh," Discord laughed as he stood up. "Sorry."

"Okay, okay," Rainbow said as she stood with him. "So they're your old coven. Still," she glared at Sombra, "what's the big idea attacking us?!"

"Forgive us," Sombra said apologetically as he changed form. "We didn't realize it was you, Discord."

"Though we should've guessed since your species of deer isn't native to this jungle," Radiant Hope said as she too changed form.

Rainbow's jaw dropped when she realized just how shiny the

unicorn mare's coat was.

"You never told me she was a *crystal* pony!"

"Didn't I?" Discord said, tapping his chin. "Huh. I suppose I didn't. Well, I didn't think it was important."

"Is there a problem?" Hope asked.

"No, no," Rainbow insisted. "I've just…never seen a crystal pony before, especially this far south."

"Yes, I was about to ask," said Discord. "What are you two doing in the Coltgo jungle?"

"I was about to ask you the same thing," said Sombra. "I thought you'd want to stay up north where there's less sunshine." He turned to Rainbow. "And who is this? Your mate?"

"No, no, no, no, no!" Discord and Rainbow uttered simultaneously.

"I'm just his friend," Rainbow insisted.

"My mate's back home," Discord explained. "Actually, she's the reason we're down here. See, we're looking for…"

"Yeah, yeah, can we do the talking later? I'm starving!"

Sombra chuckled. "Hope, why don't you take them back to the cave while I fetch us some dinner?"

"Certainly, darling," Radiant Hope replied, giving him a peck on the snout. "See you in a bit."

The stallion turned to Discord. "We can all catch up later."

He sprouted his wings and took to the skies. Hope did the same, but flew off in the opposite direction. Discord and Rainbow followed her, the former transforming into a bat.

"Did I hear him right?" Rainbow asked, taking her bat form so she could catch up. "Did he say *cave* ?"

"Yes, he did," Hope responded.

"You live in a *cave* ?! That's awesome!"

"It's the most inconspicuous place in the jungle. Most ponies and zebras are too afraid to even enter it, so we're never bothered. However, we do get a few animals seeking shelter, though that's not a problem for us."

"Ah, I get it. Safe hiding place, and," Rainbow licked her lips, "a food trap!"

"I see you and Master Sombra have really gone on the adventurous route since Norwhinny," said Discord.

"Well," Hope smiled, "after you had gone, things weren't the same. You were like our son, you know, and your absence made us feel a little…empty."

The disguised bat hung his head in guilt. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause either of you sorrow."

"That's alright. Not long after you'd left, we decided to set out on the world ourselves and find a way to fill the void. We only settled here ten years ago. It's a nice, isolated place, don't you think? We don't even get trouble from the zebra villagers."

"I bet you guys get all sorts of delicious morsels down here!" Rainbow exclaimed as her mouth watered.

"There's certainly a variety, yes. We have to be careful though. With all the Europonyeans tearing up the place the animals here are becoming endangered. Soon we might have to move to a more populated forest."

"Rainbow and I have a coven up in Tramplevania," said Discord. "There's plenty of wildlife there, though there's already six of us in total."

"Six?"

"Plus a young mortal dragon."

Hope snorted. "You've been busy, Discord. And you say you have a mate back home?"

Discord smiled. "Yes. Her name is Fluttershy."

"Then I must ask. How come you're here with this mare and not your mate?" She raised a condescending eyebrow at him. "This isn't a… oh, what do you call it? *Liaison* ?"

Discord and Rainbow stopped and stared agape at Hope as they flapped in place.

"What?!" they exclaimed.

"Okay, first off," Rainbow gagged, "gross!"

"And you know very well once a vampire meets his mate, he can want for no other!"

"Just making sure," Hope said as they continued forward. "Sombra and I have met a few other vampires over the years and some of them aren't very…decent."

"First of all, my mate is still mortal and can't make a journey like this."

"Ah."

"Secondly, I'm planning a surprise for her and the thing I need is in this jungle."

He then explained what he was looking for and Radiant Hope smiled.

"Yes, I've seen it at the top of the waterfall not far from here. It's beautiful. But you must be careful not to damage it."

"I know, I know," Discord murmured. "Sheesh, I forgot how much of a mother you can be."

"Now you know how I feel every time you get all fatherly on me," Rainbow muttered.

"Oh, so you're his daughter?" Hope asked.

The pegasus rubbed the back of her neck nervously. "Well, uh…"

"We all consider each other family in our coven," Discord explained quickly. "Not so much in the way you and Sombra accepted me as your son, but we tend to act like a family, just without any specific roles. Some days we act like brother and sister, some days like father and daughter."

"Depends on the weather," Rainbow said with a laugh.

"Ah, here we are!" Hope exclaimed as they approached a black mountain. "It's that opening near the top."

The cave resembled a mouth, as did all caves, but this one had jagged rocks around the edges, forming a set of teeth. Two especially pointy rocks hung from either side, making it look remarkably similar to vampire fangs.

"Ooh," Rainbow said in awe. "Did ya make it look like a giant mouth or was it this creepy when you found it?"

"We found it this way," Hope replied as she landed inside the jaw. "Well, Sombra added the fangs. It scares off the villagers."

"Cool," Rainbow whistled as she and Discord landed.

"We have a bit of way to go. The cave runs deep within the mountain, right into its heart."

"I see. Even if some pony found the cave, they'd have a hard time finding you."

"Correct. Your friend is very insightful."

Rainbow beamed. "Well…I *am* the smart one!"

Discord rolled his eyes as he returned to his true form. "Sure you are, Dashie."

As they traveled deeper into the mountain, Rainbow and Discord

could see just how difficult it was to get to the hideout, even by accident. The journey involved a winding path of twists and turns and ups and downs. The two felt like they were going in circles until Hope finally brought them to an illuminated cavern consisting of three easy chairs, a dining table set for four and several lanterns lit with magic. Rainbow cringed at the ribbons and lace adorning the walls and furniture.

"Welcome to our humble abode," Radiant Hope said.

"I can tell you had a hoof in decorating," Discord said, smirking at Rainbow's discomfort.

"Actually, the ribbons and lace were Sweetie Belle's idea."

Both Discord and Rainbow turned to the crystal mare with wide eyes. "Sweetie Belle?!"

"Our daughter. Well, sort of. See, after you left, Discord, Sombra and I missed having some pony to care for. We found the little filly running about the streets of Maris! Apparently, she had run away from home! All the way from Tramplevania! Can you imagine? Fortunately, Sombra and I speak Romane-ian—we've had centuries to learn all sorts of different languages—and we got the story out of her. She said she was looking for her sister, who had eloped with some stranger."

Discord and Rainbow looked knowingly at each other.

"She said her sister had always hoped to come to Maris and become a famous fashion designer, which was why she had come looking for her there. Well, we couldn't leave the dear thing running about all alone, so we took her under our wing as she refused to go back home until she found her sister.

"We tried to help, but we never found her. Eventually, we decided to adopt Sweetie Belle and raise her as our own. She didn't mind that we were vampires and when she came of age, she decided to become one too. She said that if she couldn't find her sister, she at least had us as family."

Discord bit her lip. "Err…when exactly did you find this…Sweetie Belle?"

Hope paused to think. "Why, almost a hundred years ago!"

"Uh-huh. And…what was her sister's name?"

"Rarity, I think."

Rainbow opened her mouth to speak but Discord quickly covered it.

"Could you excuse us for a moment?"

Hope nodded and went through a tunnel into another room. Rainbow lowered Discord's paw away from her mouth.

"It's definitely *our* Rarity, isn't it?" she whispered. "Didn't she have a sister named Sweetie Belle?"

"Of *course* it's our Rarity!" he hissed.

"Then shouldn't we tell her? After all, Rarity thinks her sister's been dead for decades! I'll bet Sweetie Belle's feeling the same!"

"No! It'll spoil the surprise!"

"Surprise?"

"Well, of course! The best way to arrange this reunion is for the two of them to see each other! And I have an idea! Just promise you won't say anything about this! Not even to Rarity when we get back!"

"But it would mean so much to her if we…"

"Promise, Rainbow!"

Rainbow sighed and crossed her heart. "I promise."

"Good," Discord said, turning to the tunnel the crystal pony had gone through. "Hope!"

"Yes?" she called as she returned.

"Where is this Sweetie Belle?"

"Oh, she's off on her honeymoon with her mate."

"Mate?"

"Yes, a sweet young lad named Button Mash. He came to the jungle with a troupe of explorers and wandered into our cave. Sweetie Belle was immediately taken with him and…well, you can guess what happened then."

"I see. Well, when they get back, you should all consider visiting us up in Tramplevania sometime. Since your, err, daughter is from there, she should like a trip home."

"Oh, I'm sure she'd love to." Hope frowned slightly. "Discord, I hope you don't think we were replacing you when we took Sweetie Belle in…"

"Oh, not at all! I understand. After all, we immortals crave for company. That's the very reason I bit Rainbow and the others."

"You have yet to tell me about your little family. You said there were six of you?"

"Seven. There's me, Rainbow, Twilight, Applejack, Pinkie Pie, Spike, our dragon; and Rar—Radiance!"

They sat down at the table as Discord went on to talk about each of his companions, twisting a few facts on Rarity to remain inconspicuous and holding back entirely on Applejack's past. He was just getting to Twilight when Sombra returned dragging a panther carcass which he levitated onto the table. Rainbow was the first to sink her teeth into it. As they dined, Discord finished describing his friends and then told his master why he had come here.

"It's so romantic, isn't it?" Hope exclaimed. "She'll certainly appreciate it, son, especially when you tell her how you'd come all this way!"

"Tell us more about this mate of yours," Sombra demanded. "Have

you changed her yet?"

Discord shook his head. "No."

"Does she know what you are?"

"Yes. In fact, when we met I was about to…drain her pet bunny."

"Discord!" Hope scolded. "Surely you know better than to prey on something so small and helpless!"

"I was thirsty, okay? Anyway, she was frightened of me at first, but after we got to know each other a bit…" He sighed dreamily. "Oh, you two are going to love her. She is beautiful!"

Hope raised an eyebrow. "Hopefully that's not the *only* reason you love her."

"Oh, no, no, no! I mean…sure, that's what I first noticed about her, but she is also kind, gentle, caring…"

"She sounds lovely," Sombra commended. "I can't wait to meet her."

"Yeah." Discord frowned. "The problem is that she has such an angelic soul that loves every living creature, especially animals. While she's not terrified of me anymore, she just can't get around my…" he glanced down guiltily at the panther's corpse, "diet."

"Ah, yes," Hope nodded. "That was the one thing that made *me* reluctant to be with Sombra. Then again, it was mostly drinking ponies that bothered me and I was able to compromise on just animals."

"But Fluttershy *loves* animals! The other day I almost killed a deer in front of her, and she was absolutely horrified!"

"She'll come around eventually, son," Sombra assured him. "After all, when Fate decrees something," he smiled as he took his wife's hoof, "it's bound to happen."

Discord grinned slightly. "I'm hoping once I show Fluttershy her surprise, she'll think better of me."

"It'll certainly make some progress," said Hope.

"Make sure to invite us to the wedding when it happens," Sombra said, "now that you know where to find us."

"Of course," said Discord. "Oh, and you can bring Sweetie Belle and her mate too."

"And should you need a place for your honeymoon, you're always welcome here." He winked. "We'll go on a trip ourselves to give you some privacy, of course."

"Honeymoon?"

Discord stared off into space as he began pondering on this. He hadn't given much thought to their honeymoon before, or their wedding for that matter. But now he was imagining him and Fluttershy flying through the Coltgo jungle, soaring through the starry sky, watching the moonrise from the waterfall.

Rainbow's yawn snapped him out of his thoughts. "Well, I'm full. Do you guys have a place where I can sleep?"

"Dashie, don't you remember?" Discord said. "We're on a quest!"

"You two can finish your quest tomorrow," Hope said in a warm, motherly tone. "You know how vampires need to rest after a meal." She smiled at Rainbow. "You can sleep in Sweetie Belle's room, dear. Come, I'll show you."

Rainbow groaned. "It's not as girly as this room, is it?"

Hope chuckled as she escorted her down a tunnel.

"Since you managed to make your own castle," Sombra said to Discord, "I wager you can fix up a room for yourself, and maybe fix up a less girly one for your friend?"

"I could," Discord smirked, "but she didn't ask me, did she?"

They both laughed, but then Sombra's face quickly turned serious.

"You certain this Fluttershy," he said carefully, "is alright with what you are?"

The draconequus shrugged. "Enough to be around me, that is."

"And…your past…how much of it have you explained to her?"

He bit his lip and twiddled his fingers. "Enough."

Sombra crossed his forelegs and gave the stare that warned Discord that he was about to use his fatherly traits on him.

"So you've told her of our old," the unicorn coughed, "habits?"

Discord rubbed the back of his neck. "I've told her that I've killed a few ponies in the past…"

"Did you tell her why?"

He slammed his paw on the table. "What does it matter?"

"Discord, take this piece of advice from me. A relationship must be built on trust, especially one with your mate, because she is meant to be the most important thing in your life. You must be honest with her, let her know everything significant about you, good and bad."

"And what, exactly, are you referring to?"

Sombra inhaled deeply. "She must know not just what you have done, but what I almost made you to be."

Discord stood up so quickly the table nearly fell over. "No! She does *not* need to know about that! Not even my friends know about it!"

" *Hope* knows about it. She's always known. But why do you think she stays with me, Discord? It's because we have trust."

The draconequus grunted as he paced the room like a caged animal. "The past is the past. It doesn't matter now."

"You need to tell her…"

"We've only known each other a few weeks!"

"Fair point. Still, before she makes the decision to let you change her, she needs to know your darkest secrets, not just because she's your mate, but so she can learn to love even the worst part of you. She can't fully love you if she doesn't know you."

Discord snapped up a coffin, climbed inside and muttered gruffly, "Thank you, Master. I'll keep that in mind. Good night."

He slammed the lid closed, making Sombra shake his head with a sigh.

"Still as stubborn as ever," he murmured as he went down a tunnel. "Hopefully this Fluttershy can do something about that."

Pony puns:

Normanedy=Normandy (province in France)

Maris=Paris

Colgo=Congo

Zebrica=Africa (though I think that one was obvious)

Europonyean=European

Livingstallion and Stable=Dr. Livingstone and Mr. Stanley

Norwhinny=Norway

Count Trenderhoof

I thought I'd be able to get more work done over winter break, but things have been tough at home this Christmas season. It's going to be harder now that the spring semester's starting and I've gotten a part-time job so I'm going to be busier than ever.

Well, at least I got this next one done. Finally we can move things along.

Starlight and Fluttershy were about to sit down for dinner when Coco Pommel came rushing in excitedly.

"Doamnă, doamnă!" she cried. "Count Trenderhoof and his sister are here!"

"Is he now?" Starlight beamed as she smoothed out her skirts. "Escort them to the east drawing room. We'll be with them shortly." She raised her eyebrow as she studied Coco's face. "Why are your cheeks all red?"

Her face became even redder at the mention of it. "Oh, I, uh…I'm just a little warm, doamnă, I…"

"Never mind. Just go, go!"

Coco curtsied and fled the room. Starlight let out a groan.

"If he's going to be fashionably late, he should at least do it before or after a meal, not during!"

She and Fluttershy were surprised to find not two, but six ponies in the drawing room. The mare and stallion up front were clearly the nobles due to their fine clothing. The mare was a light yellow unicorn with green eyes and a curly red and gold mane that resembled fire. She wore a neat blue gown and a flowery yellow sunbonnet.

Standing in attendance behind her were three earth mares in aprons. Something about them made Fluttershy shiver. Perhaps it was the seemingly sinister smile worn by the pale yellow one with sharp maroon eyes and an enormous puffed up orange mane. The one on her left was light violet with two purple and green ponytails sweeping out of her head and a bored expression on her face. The third one was light blue, her darker blue mane tied up in a single ponytail, her maroon eyes staring off to the side as she smiled absent-mindedly.

Not too far off was the largest stallion Fluttershy had ever laid eyes on. He was a pegasus with muscles so enormous he could easily be mistaken for a white hippopotamus. He stood still and silent, staring directly in front of him, not seeming to acknowledge that any pony had entered the room.

Then there was Count Trenderhoof, a tall, brown unicorn stallion with an excellently coiffed blond mane and a handsome stubble on his chin. As he smiled at the ladies, his pearly white teeth glinted, making Starlight giggle like a school filly.

"Lady Starlight," he said with a suave voice and a gentlecoltly bow. "We apologize for being so late, but we had some trouble finding our way here."

"Of course," Starlight continued to giggle. "No problem at all, Count Trenderhoof."

Her breath was taken away as he slowly took her hoof and kissed it. "It is a pleasure to meet you at last, doamnă."

She looked like she was about to faint when he turned his violet eyes to Fluttershy. "And this must be the famous Lady Fluttershy."

"H-How do you do?" Fluttershy stammered as he took her hoof.

"I've heard so much about you, domnişoară," he whispered. "You're just as lovely as your aunt described you."

As he kissed her hoof, Fluttershy had the sudden urge to cringe. It was strange. Stallions always kissed her hoof upon meeting her and

no matter who it was, she would feel both awkward and flustered, as it was a form of physical contact she could never quite get used to. However, there was something about this hoof kiss that felt…wrong. Then she thought of Discord and how he had kissed her hoof. That had been exciting. Why did this feel so different?

The yellow noblemare coughed, calling Trenderhoof's attention away.

"Ah, where are my manners!" he exclaimed as he gestured to his companion. "Allow me to introduce my sister, Lady Sunset Shimmer."

"Charmed," Sunset Shimmer said with a curtsy.

"And, um," Starlight said, looking disapprovingly at the rest, "who are all these…?"

"My sister's chambermaids and our coach horse," Trenderhoof explained. "After all, one simply cannot travel without a proper entourage, don't you agree?"

"Oh, yes, I'm…sure. It's just that we weren't aware that…we only prepared rooms for you and Lady Sunset."

"Oh. Well, I hope it's not too much trouble if you could…"

"Not at all! If your maids wouldn't mind sharing a room."

The yellow maid smiled and curtsied. "Absolutely n—"

"Wait!" the blue one piped, as if snapping out of a trance. "Three of us in one room? But we'll get so crowded! Not to mention Aria snores like a bear—ouch!"

The violet one had jabbed her in the ribs.

"Shut up, Sonata!" she hissed.

"Adagio!" Sonata whined to the yellow one. "Aria hit me!"

"I'm envious," Adagio muttered.

"They have no problem with it!" Sunset said quickly. "Do you, girls?"

Adagio locked gaze with her mistress, and Fluttershy could sense some resentment in it. But she forced a smile and said through her teeth:

"Of course, my lady."

"Coco!" Starlight called. "Show Lady Sunset's maids to the guest room on the third floor and situate the coach horse in the attic. See that some bedding is brought."

"Bulk Biceps can sleep anywhere," Trenderhoof chuckled as he patted his servant on the side. "Can't you, old boy?"

Bulk Biceps said nothing, only grunted in response. He and the three maids followed Coco out of the room. Fluttershy felt uncomfortable as the maids passed her. They all sent her condescending gazes that made her shrink. It was peculiar. Why should she be feeling this way about servants far below her rank?

"We were just about to have dinner," Starlight grinned at the count. "Would you care to join us?"

"Thank you," Trenderhoof politely replied, "but we already had a bite to eat on the way here. Though we can sit with you at the table and make conversation."

"Oh, of course! By all means!"

Fluttershy got a sense of déjà vu as she and her aunt sat down with their two guests. Once again, she and her aunt were dining while some pony else simply sat and watched them, only this time it was two some ponies. Starlight and Trenderhoof began conversing, though Fluttershy noticed him making frequent sideways glances at her. She tried to get a word in, but as usual, her aunt prevented her. They were talking about property and wealth, which did not interest Fluttershy, so she turned her attention to the count's sister, only to find her glaring intensely at her. Fluttershy quickly looked down at her soup, thinking she would start a quarrel with the noblemare if she stared too long.

"You say you're here on business," Starlight said giddily. "Might I ask what kind of business?"

"Oh," Trenderhoof replied, waving his hoof, "just some financial business with an old colleague of mine. Let's just say it involves a good ten thousand."

"Ooh. That's quite the deal!"

"Of course," he said as he glanced at Fluttershy, "I've also been meaning to…take a wife."

Fluttershy turned her head to avoid his gaze. Starlight simply smiled.

"Are you, now?"

"I haven't made any specific selection, of course! It is just a matter I've been dwelling on for quite some time."

"Well, any mare would be lucky to have you. What about you, Lady Sunset?"

"What?" Sunset Shimmer uttered as if she were surprised that she was being addressed.

"Are you married?"

Sunset opened her mouth but Trenderhoof interrupted her. "My sister is still single! But yes, she is of marriageable age. You wouldn't happen to know any noble bachelors in the vicinity, would you, doamnă?"

"Well," Starlight said, "there's Lord Fancy Pants, a wealthy widower on the other side of the forest. In fact, I told him you were coming and he asked me to invite you to his dinner party next week. All sorts of suitable stallions will be there, I'm sure!"

"I don't quite think…" Sunset tried to say.

"Sounds splendid!" Trenderhoof exclaimed gleefully. "We'd be delighted to come!"

His sister sent him a furious glare, but he didn't seem to notice as he looked back at Fluttershy.

"Has your niece considered marriage?"

Fluttershy bit her lip to stop herself from screaming.

"Oh, she's drawn the attention of several suitors!" Starlight bragged. "Including Lord Fancy Pants himself!"

"Uh-oh," Trenderhoof chuckled. "Looks like you've got some competition, Sunset."

"Yes," Sunset grunted, glancing briefly at Fluttershy. "Looks like."

"Though it is really no surprise. After all," he smiled at the pegasus, "your niece is quite charming."

Fluttershy recognized the seductiveness in his tone. She had heard it from Discord a few times before. All those times had made her shiver in the right places. From Trenderhoof's mouth, it produced the opposite effect. All the shivering made her desperate for a blanket.

Trenderhoof cleared his throat and recited:

"No beauty can compare

To this remarkable mare,

For she is one so fair

And must be handled with care."

Starlight squealed and applauded. "That was beautiful, Count Trenderhoof! I'm not familiar with that verse. Where's it from?"

He raised his chin proudly. "I composed it myself."

"You write poetry!"

"As a hobby. I find expressing my thoughts and feelings through words to be most relaxing."

"Well, you're an artist! Fluttershy here just adores poetry!"

"Actually," Fluttershy tried to say, "I don't really read that much…"

"Could you recite another?"

It was official. She missed Discord more than ever now.

For the next hour they listened to the count's poetry. Fluttershy had never seen her aunt so giddy, and it must have been genuine because there was no way a pony could fake so big a smile for so long. Sunset Shimmer seemed to enjoy her brother's poetry even more, for she could not take her eyes off him. Fluttershy just sat quietly as Trenderhoof droned on and on. It wasn't that the words weren't beautiful, but there was something about the way he said them that seemed contradictory. He sounded like he meant every word, but his expression lacked sincerity. His smile was warm, but whenever he looked at her through those shining spectacles, she felt cold.

Then she began reflecting on her thoughts. This whole evening she had done nothing but judge this stallion when he had done nothing to offend her. She had even compared him to Discord, which was unfair. Whether she loved him or not, she shouldn't be so quick to judge.

"This next one is for you, domnişoară."

Fluttershy's head shot up when she felt Trenderhoof's hoof on hers. His violet eyes were boring into hers. For a brief moment, his irises became yellow with red pupils.

"Like the gentle wings of a butterfly," he said as he took her other hoof, "So is my sweet Fluttershy…"

She didn't hear the rest. She was staring down at their hooves. His were soft and smooth, as hooves should be. Suddenly, one of them became a paw, which wrapped tightly but tenderly around her left hoof. Its palm was rough, but the fingers were soft and warm. His other hoof became an eagle claw, skinny and a bit cold, but as its talons closed around her right hoof, they caressed her gently,

making her shiver.

"Domnişoară?"

Fluttershy looked up into the eyes behind the glasses and became aware of to whom they belonged. Or rather, to whom they *didn't* belong. She swiped her hooves out of his grasp.

"F-Forgive me," she stammered, standing up, "but I, um…have a bit of a headache, so I, um…need to lie down. *M ă s cuzați* !"

She rushed out of the room before her aunt could protest. Starlight's mouth was open in shock. She coughed and forced a smile as if nothing was wrong.

"I'm sure once she gets some rest, my niece will…remember her manners."

"That's quite alright, doamnă," Trenderhoof said with a yawn. "It has been a long day of travel for us. I think we shall retire early too."

"Yes, yes, of course. Double Diamond, escort the Count and Lady to their rooms."

Double Diamond bowed and led the two guests upstairs to a small but elegant guest room with a king-sized bed.

"And yours is next-door, domnişoară," he told Sunset, indicating the door to the right.

" *Mulțumim* , my good stallion," Trenderhoof grinned. "Could you fetch our servants? My sister and I would like a word with them."

"Of course, domnule!"

Double Diamond bowed once again before setting to his task. Trenderhoof waited until he was out of sight before pushing his sister into his room, glancing both ways down the hall and shutting the door.

"How many times have I told you not to *rush* me?!" Sunset growled through her teeth.

Trenderhoof ignored her remark. "So, what do you think of Lady Starlight's niece?"

She huffed and pretended to be interested in the edges of her hoof. "Not much of a talker, is she?"

"Yes, but she has a significant dowry. At least she has that going for her. Well, that and her youth and beauty."

Sunset narrowed her eyes. "She's not *that* pretty."

Trenderhoof smirked. "Jealous, are we, *sister* ?"

She snorted as her green eyes turned red. " *Don't* call me that in private! It's bad enough that I have to endure that title twelve hours a day! I'm sick of you telling every pony that I'm your sister!"

"Well, Lady Starlight wouldn't let me marry her niece if she knew you were my mate."

She scowled. "Yes, darkness forbid you should cause a scandal with *two* wives!"

"Sunset, Sunset!" he cooed as he cupped her chin. "My little phoenix feather, you know we're short on money! Even if old Caballeron has what he promised us, it won't be enough. You want to continue living in splendor, don't you, my fiery sparrow?"

Sunset grunted as she swatted his hoof away. "Don't you use your pretty words on me! We would still have Lady Cherry Jubilee's fortune if you hadn't squandered it all on your little concubines!"

"You called?"

Sunset turned to the door and growled upon seeing Adagio, the other two maids and the coach horse enter the room.

"Shut the door, Bulk Biceps," Trenderhoof ordered calmly. "We mustn't be overheard."

Bulk Biceps kicked out his back hoof and slammed the door with ease. Trenderhoof turned back to his fake sister.

"I have told you time and time again, darling. Just because I keep a few of my… *conquests* , doesn't mean I have… *relations* with them."

Sonata tilted her head. "But what about last—ouch!"

Aria had silenced her with a kick to the knee.

"They're just here for my protection," Trenderhoof explained, taking Sunset's hoof. " *Our* protection."

"I don't *need* protection!" Sunset shouted, wrenching her hoof out of his hold.

He chuckled. "Of course not. You're a strong, clever mare. That's why I mated with you."

"Humph!" she huffed, turning her back to him.

"And just think," he murmured seductively, slithering his hooves over her shoulders. "Once we have enough…recruits, we'll have an army big enough to conquer all of Tramplevania. I will be King forever, and you," he whispered into her ear, "will be Queen."

Sunset rolled her eyes and used her magic to send him flying across the room.

"Master!" Sonata cried, rushing to his side.

"You've been saying that for over a decade!" Sunset howled, her horn glowing dangerously and her eyes glaring red.

As she became angrier and angrier, her fur stood on end, her teeth grew into pointy fangs and her gown ripped as orange bat wings sprang out of her back. Adagio, Aria and Sonata transformed too and stood around Trenderhoof protectively.

"Since you bit me, you've promised me world conquest, that I would become the most powerful mare that ever lived! Instead, all you've done is chase every pretty set of legs you've come across!"

Trenderhoof laughed. "A stallion's got to eat, dear."

Sunset laughed too, though mockingly. "Didn't your mother teach you not to *lay* with your food?!"

He shrugged. "Whatever it takes to get close enough."

She scowled at the three maids. "And *these* ?!"

"You have to admit the Dazzlings here have been very useful. I knew they would be strong as vampires, but I couldn't have predicted their hypnotic singing powers."

"Too bad it only works on stallions," Adagio smirked at Sunset. "I would *love* to have you under *my* spell."

Sunset roared as she leapt at Adagio and pressed her against the wall, pointing her glowing horn threateningly at her head.

"You forget your place, Adagio," she snarled. " *I* am the alpha female here!" She moved her horn closer. "Or do you want me to prove my power once again?"

Adagio gritted her fangs together and felt ready to rip out the unicorn's throat. Then she glanced at Trenderhoof, who raised his hoof and shook his head. Adagio grinned innocently at Sunset.

"I was only jesting," she said sweetly, " *mistress* ."

"Put her down, Sunset," Trenderhoof commanded.

She didn't want to, but as soon as he said it, her hooves dropped from Adagio's shoulders, letting her slip to the ground.

"Leave us," Trenderhoof ordered his servants. "Return to your rooms."

"Yes, Master," the Dazzlings said, curtsying in unison.

Bulk Biceps bowed silently before following the maids out and using his back hoof to close the door behind them. Sunset slowly changed back into a pony, but did not turn to face her mate. She didn't realize he was eyeing her now bare back.

"Sunset," he cooed, slowly approaching her. "Dearest, darling, Phoenix Feather…"

He set his hoof on her shoulder. She shrugged it off.

"You know these minions mean nothing to me. The only time I ever advanced upon them was when I was trying to recruit them."

"Why didn't you just hypnotize them?" she grumbled. "It'd save a lot of trouble."

"True, but where's the fun in that?"

She spun around, glaring furiously at him.

"Admit it!" she exclaimed, poking him in the chest. "You *like* seducing your victims! It's all a game to you! I suppose you're going to do the same to Lady Fluttershy!"

"I may not have to. Her aunt already adores me. She'll give me her niece before the week is through! Then we'll be rich again and we won't need the pretty little pegasus. In fact," he sneered as he wrapped his hooves around her, "I'll give *you* the honor of disposing of her."

Sunset raised an eyebrow. "Truly?"

"Would I lie to you, my little meadow lark?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Alright, I'll admit. It can be… *fun* , tricking mares into loving me and seducing them to their deaths, but we," he whispered as his hoof slid down to her front leg, "are mates. We share each other's blood. Don't you remember what that means?"

How could Sunset forget? He had told her the day they had mated. They had been sitting on a hill at sunset, overlooking the sleepy village she was from. He had said the light danced off her hair, making her look like a phoenix burning bright. As they had looked down on the ponies below, she had revealed her desire to one day rule over them, to show them what a mare was capable of. As a filly

she had been fascinated with magic and wanted to become a powerful sorceress, but every pony had told her magic was not something a mare should affiliate herself with and should learn no more than simple levitation. This had only convinced her to study more magic so that someday, she would get them to eat their words.

And he had promised he could give her that. Before she had known it, his teeth were sinking into her neck. He had cut his foreleg with his horn and commanded her to drink, and they had become one.

"We are bound together for all eternity," he whispered as he stood on his hind legs and pressed her against him. "I am yours and you are mine. Nothing can come between us."

Sunset panted heavily as he removed his glasses so she could properly gaze into those gorgeous amethysts.

"I gave you *everything* ," he continued. "I gave you wings, immortality, and more power than you could ever imagine. Once we have our vampire army," he leaned into her ear and whispered, "I can make you a goddess. The world will be ours, and those foolish mortals will bow to our will. They will never mock you again. As for those who try to fight back, we will drain them of their blood and pick our teeth with their bones."

Sunset shivered with glee. "Oh, keep talking!"

"You will be the most powerful, most feared creature in the entire world. They will be on their knees, begging for your mercy, but you won't give it to them."

They bounced as they fell back onto the bed.

"Don't stop," she heaved.

He smiled as he lifted her skirt. "Now why would I do that?"

And so she surrendered herself to him, for no matter how angry she was, she could never say no to him.

Once again, Fluttershy lay awake in bed thinking about Discord, though this time it was for an entirely different reason. Angel, whom she was petting, didn't need to ask to know his mistress was missing the creature. He had never liked the beast, but these past few days Fluttershy had been very mopey, even forgetting to feed him sometimes!

Not to mention she wouldn't stop talking about him when they were alone.

"Do you think he'll be back soon, Angel?"

The rabbit snorted angrily.

"I know you don't like him and I know I shouldn't be missing as much as I am, but I am! I never had a friend before him…"

Angel squeaked harshly.

"Except you, of course, Angel. Oh, but Angel, if only you knew him like I do. Yes, he's a vampire who feeds off animals' blood, but he can't help that. I'm sure if carrots were sentient, they would hate you for eating them, but you have to eat them to survive. But if you would just spend time with Discord, you would see that he wouldn't hurt a fly…unless he was hungry."

She blushed as she smiled. "And he's such good company. He makes me laugh, he takes interest in my thoughts and opinions, and he's actually…oh, you'll think me silly for saying this, but for someone of his species, he's actually sort of…handsome."

Angel looked at her as if she were crazy.

Perhaps she was. Before, Fluttershy could not stop shivering at the thought of Discord's frightful appearance. Now, when she imagined gazing into his red and yellow eyes, she did not see ferocity, but gentleness. She recalled how he would hold her hoof, in either his large paw or bony claw. Both she knew were strong, yet would hold her with the greatest of care, and he would look at her with those gentles eyes as if she were the most precious thing in the world.

Weeks ago, she had claimed she could never love a monster like

him. She regretted saying those words now that she knew the only thing truly monstrous about Discord was how he looked. Loving him looked like more of a possibility now.

Was that why she couldn't stand being with Trenderhoof? He had done nothing wrong and seemed like a decent stallion, and yet she yearned for Discord. Was it more than just missing him? Could it be she was starting to have… *feelings* for him?

For some reason, the idea didn't disgust her, but it did make her slightly uneasy. She had never been in love before, so how could she be sure that's what she was feeling? If it was, what would that mean for her and Discord? She knew he was in love with her and wanted her to feel the same, but if she did, what then? They would get married, meaning he would change her, and she'd have to start…feeding on animals.

She looked down at Angel.

"You wouldn't like me very much as a vampire, would you?"

The rabbit's eyes widened in fear. Fluttershy sighed.

"I don't want animals to fear me, and even if I let Discord hunt for me, it might be hard to contain myself around you." She stroked her bunny. "I might have to say goodbye to you to keep you safe."

Angel gasped and flung his tiny paws around Fluttershy's face. She giggled and held him close.

"I couldn't get rid of you, Angel, but I might not have a choice if there's a chance I'll cause you harm."

She sighed. It certainly wouldn't be easy marrying Discord, regardless of how she felt about him. She wasn't sure if it was love yet, but she certainly missed his company.

A rap on the window made her sit up in bed. Angel bared his teeth and Fluttershy gasped in delight when they saw the cause of the noise. Fluttershy leaped out of bed, rushed to the window, quickly unhitched it and shouted:

"DISCORD!"

The draconequus nearly fell backward as Fluttershy attacked him with a hug, her forelegs squeezing him around his neck. It caught him completely off-guard. He had not expected such a warm welcome, let alone a hug. She was *hugging* him! She was willingly *touching* him! Not just any touch, a physical sign of affection! He didn't know how to respond, as he had never received such a gesture from her!

When Fluttershy realized what she was doing, she pulled away and hastily smoothed out her skirts.

"I…I'm sorry, I…" she stammered, her cheeks turning red. "I was, um…I didn't mean to…"

"Did you," Discord asked in bewilderment, "m-miss me?"

She averted her eyes to the floor. "Um, uh…m-maybe…a little?"

When she looked back up he was wearing the widest grin she had ever seen on his face.

"Is that…" she murmured, "silly?"

"No!" Discord squeaked before clearing his throat. "No, it's not. Actually…I missed you too."

As he took her in and saw how the moonlight framed her gentle face, tangled hair and white nightdress; he swore she was even more beautiful then he'd remembered, but he didn't say it aloud. Meanwhile, Fluttershy was only now realizing as her heartrate increased that she had never been this happy to see Discord. Had absence truly made the heart grow fonder?

"Where have you been all this time?" Fluttershy finally asked.

"Sorry I was away so long," Discord said apologetically, "but I was getting a surprise for you."

"A surprise? What sort of surprise?"

"Close your eyes and hold out your hooves. Oh, and give me permission to touch them."

She raised an eyebrow. "No tricks?"

He chuckled. "I can't come in. There's not much I can do from here."

She granted his request and waited. She felt his paw take her hooves and smiled at the sensation of feeling its softness again. Then she felt something drop into her hooves. It was smooth like clay and circular at the bottom. She sniffed and smelled something fresh. She had an idea of what it was before she opened her eyes.

It was a flower pot. Inside was a single purple iris.

"Discord, it's beautiful!" she exclaimed in elation. Then she frowned. "Though…why would it take you a week to get me one iris?'

"Not just any iris!" Discord smirked. "Watch."

He reached out his claw and plucked one of the flower's petals. Fluttershy was about to scold him when something miraculous happened. Right before her eyes, the petal grew back. She gasped in amazement.

"It's the…it's the…"

"The Infinite Iris!" Discord declared.

"But…this is…"

"One of the rarest flowers in the world? I know."

"But however did you get it? The only known location of the Infinite Iris is…"

"Zebrica. At the top of the highest waterfall in the Coltgo jungle, to be exact."

She gazed at him in wonderment. "You mean…you went all the way to Zebrica…just to get me…a flower?"

"Not just any flower!"

"Still! You went all that way for…me?"

He smiled lovingly at her. "I'd fly to the edge of the world for you." He looked down at the flower. "You know why it's called the Infinite Iris, right?"

Fluttershy nodded. "It lives forever. Even when its petals are plucked, it forever stays in bloom."

"That's why I thought it appropriate, because that's how long I'll love you."

She was speechless. He'd traveled thousands of kilometers to get this small but rare gift. It also appealed to her interest in flowers, which showed that he had been listening to her. And he had been in Zebrica, a sunny land! He had risked being fried, and yet he had gone anyway!

It was proof that he truly cared for her.

Angel hopped onto the window seat and jittered furiously at the draconequus. He merely rolled his eyes and frightened the bunny with a flash of his fangs. Angel squeaked and skittered under the bed.

"Sorry about Angel," said Fluttershy. "We were…talking about you before you came."

"Really?" Discord smirked, smoothing back his mane. "Am I really all that interesting?"

"Discord!" she scolded, yet laughed at his quip.

"I'm glad I didn't wake you. I almost didn't come because I thought I'd disturb your peaceful slumber." He glanced at the iris. "I have an idea. So I don't have to worry about waking you, how about we use this flower as a signal? If you want me to come visit you in the night, place it at this window. If you'd rather sleep or just don't want to see me, remove it from the window."

Fluttershy looked at the flower and then at him. Then she smiled as she lowered the pot onto the windowsill.

"Tell me about Zebrica."

And so Discord gladly recounted all that had happened on his trip, leaving out the details about hunting. When he got to the part about meeting his old master and mistress, he didn't bring up Sweetie Belle or the private conversation he had had with Sombra. Then he talked about searching all the waterfalls for the Infinite Iris. The reason it was so hard to find was because it looked like any other iris. Unfortunately, he had had to pluck a few flowers before finding the right one. Fluttershy forgave him, knowing he'd had good intentions.

"And Zebrica, what's it like?"

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Discord described. "Such magnificent trees, colorful vegetation, and the animals…" He trailed off. "Well, there are a lot of them. And the air is so clean and fresh, you can clear out all the waste in your lungs in one breath! And the sky is so…well, I can't tell you what it's like in the daytime, but at night, you can see millions and millions of stars! It's like looking at a sea of light!"

"Discord," Fluttershy said with a dreamy look in her eye, "could you take me there someday?"

He smiled, leaned closer to her and whispered, "It could be our honeymoon."

Her face fell at this, and Discord mistook her shock for discomfort. He'd forgotten how uneasy talk of marriage made her.

"I mean…" he stammered, rubbing the back of his neck. "Yes, I will take you there, regardless of…whatever should happen to us in the future." He took a deep breath and looked at her sincerely. "I promise."

Fluttershy's smile returned and she gently placed her hooves over his paw. "That would be wonderful."

For a long while, they stared at each other, their eyes locked in

gaze. Finally, Discord coughed and reluctantly slid his paw away.

"It's getting late. You should rest."

"Wait!" Fluttershy exclaimed, a little too loudly.

He looked back at her to see her blushing again.

"You've given me something…something wonderful, so I should… give you something too."

"Oh, no," Discord insisted, holding up his paw and claw. "You don't have to give me anything in return. The fact that you loved my gift is enough."

"Oh, but I want to! See, you've given me something simple, but… rare and…meaningful." She gazed up at him. "And that's…what I'm going to…give you."

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

She took a deep breath. "Close your eyes."

Discord complied, curious as to what she was going to give him. She couldn't possibly have known he'd had a gift planned for her, so when could she have had the time to get him something?

Suddenly, he felt something soft and moist on his lips. It was only for an brief instant, but the moment it made contact, his eyes popped open wide in time to see Fluttershy pulling away from him, her face even redder than before.

"S-Sorry," she stuttered. "You should know that's the first time I've…"

She trailed off as Discord's eyes spun around in their sockets, his wings fluttered at the speed of a hummingbird's and steam blew out of his ears, all working in tandem with a goofy smile even bigger than the last one.

The body spasms came to an abrupt halt and the draconequus let out a content sigh as he dropped backward. Fluttershy shrieked and

leaned out the window.

"Discord! Are you al—?"

He shot up into the sky and did a somersault while crying triumphantly, "YES, YES, YES, *YES* ! SHE KISSED ME! THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CREATURE IN THE WORLD KISSED *ME* ! WOO HOO!"

Fluttershy laughed as he danced off into the night and blushed deeper, thinking about how much she had enjoyed that kiss too.

Okay, okay. So I didn't want to go with the trope of making Blueblood the Gaston-type villain. So I decided to take a different direction with Trenderhoof. And I mean *very* different direction. I understand he's a nice guy in the canon-verse, but I don't like him very much because he couldn't take a hint, which gave me a lot of unpleasant high school flashbacks.

The Dazzlings are going to be ponies in this, as humans or merponies wouldn't quite fit in this situation.

Finally, I get to do something with Sunset Shimmer!

I was shocked to find out "Infinite Iris" is a makeup line. I just thought it sounded cool.

***Mă scuzați=* "Excuse me"**

***Mulțumim=* "We thank you"**

Sunset

I would've gotten this done sooner had it not been for original content I've had to write for two different classes. Expect much slower updates in the future. This was going to be a longer chapter, but there was so much in the second half it works better as its own chapter.

"Come on, come on, you gotta see this!" Pinkie piped as she bounced down the hall.

"Pinkie, why are you leading me to the fancy bathroom?" Rainbow groaned as they reached a pair of blue double doors.

"Shush!" Pinkie whispered as she pressed her ear against the doors. "Keep quiet and look!"

She pushed them open a crack and Rainbow rolled her eyes as she went along with Pinkie's craziness and peeked in with her.

Rarity had asked Discord to make a larger, more elaborate bathroom once the castle started getting crowded. The room contained a shining, circular pool bordered with glimmering white tiles. Two tiny waterfalls trickled into the pool, keeping it fresh and clean. But the peaceful bathing area wasn't what made Rainbow's jaw drop.

In the center of the pool stood Twilight. Not quite in the pool, but on the water's surface. Her eyes were closed and her horn was illuminated as three small orbs of water circled her. Her brow was furrowed, as if she were in a state of deep concentration.

"What is she doing?" Rainbow whispered.

"I don't know," Pinkie replied. "I just came in here to play pirate, but she was in here, acting like those monks in the east you're always talking about."

"Hey! For your information, eastern monks do *not* levitate themselves like that while meditating!" She paused. "Okay, so maybe some of the unicorns do that for fun, but they don't stand on water or anything creepy like that!"

"Well, I'm gonna ask her. It's hard to play pirate when there's a vampire meditating in the middle of the pool." Pinkie burst open the doors. "Hey, Twilight!"

"Gah!" Twilight gasped, opening her eyes.

Her concentration broke and the spheres became one with the pool as Twilight fell in after them. Pinkie and Rainbow stepped to the edge and looked down curiously at the wet unicorn.

"What was that all about?" Rainbow inquired.

"Yeah, you were standing on water!" Pinkie exclaimed. "That's not natural! Even for a unicorn!"

Twilight sighed as she crawled out of the pool. "I was practicing zebra magic."

"Zebra magic?" Rainbow and Pinkie questioned.

"Yes. While you and Discord were away, Rainbow, I decided to pay Zecora a visit. See, now that I'm a vampire, I can take revenge on the Sirens who killed my family, but I don't know who they are or what they look like. It was very dark when I last saw them. So I thought Zecora could tell me. She came up with a blank, but she said if I call upon my own memories, I can find their location myself. So she's been teaching me a few techniques."

"I didn't know zebras could…hover like that," Rainbow said.

"Yeah, doesn't Zecora usually look in that glowing crystal ball of hers?" Pinkie asked.

Twilight giggled. "Apparently, that's just for show. The real magic comes from in here," she said, pointing to her chest, "and here," then to her temple. "In fact, some of the magic she uses isn't what we consider witchcraft, but tricks she learned from a shaman in her

village before she came to Tramplevania."

"So…what exactly were you doing just now?" asked Rainbow.

"I was trying to find the Sirens by concentrating on my memories of them."

"And did you find anything?"

She sighed. "Nope. But…I did see the image of a unicorn. It wasn't very clear but it was like looking at a pony-shaped flame."

"Do you think it's one of the Sirens?" Pinkie inquired.

"I don't think so. As far as I could tell, none of them were unicorns and I'm pretty sure I saw a horn on this mare, but if I was concentrating on the Sirens, she must be connected with them somehow."

"If you ever do find those Sirens," Rainbow smiled, pounding her front hooves together, "I'll pound 'em with ya!"

"Me too!" Pinkie piped, standing proudly on her hind legs. "An enemy of my friends' is an enemy of mine!"

Twilight grinned. "Thanks, you guys."

Pinkie narrowed her eyes at her. "Now walk the plank, ya scurvy dog!"

She strapped a black patch over the unicorn's eye, confusing her. "Huh?"

"Just go with it," Rainbow murmured as Pinkie tied a red bandana on her head.

Fluttershy wasn't sure how much more she could take of Count Trenderhoof. All afternoon, he did nothing but drone on and on about himself. Apparently he had traveled a lot and that discussion would've been more interesting had Lady Starlight not cut her niece

off every time she had a question.

His sister wasn't much better. Lady Sunset hardly said a word, but when she did she was extremely unpleasant. At breakfast she had regurgitated her food onto Starlight's good carpet and scolded the cook for serving her improperly cooked eggs! Trenderhoof had excused himself a minute later, looking quite green. They must have been allergic or something, because Fluttershy didn't find anything wrong with the eggs. Then as Sunset was passing Double Diamond and Party Favor in the hall, she had snapped at them, demanding that they not stare at her. And now as they were having tea, Night Glider had accidentally dropped the tray onto Sunset's lap and the noblemare was throwing a fit.

"You clumsy oaf! You've gotten tea all over my new dress!"

"I-I'm sorry, domnişoară, I-I'll bring you another…" Night Glider stammered.

"Don't even bother! Get out of here!"

The maid shrieked as Sunset used her magic to throw a cup at her. She didn't hesitate to dash out of the room.

"I deeply apologize for my servants' behavior!" Starlight insisted. "Good help is *so* hard to find these days!"

"Look at this!" Sunset exclaimed, gesturing to the large brown stain on her yellow skirt. "This is disgraceful! Now I will have to go change! Aria! I'll need you to wash this!"

Aria, who had been standing in attendance with the other maids, rolled her eyes and gruffly followed her mistress out.

"Oh dear," Starlight said, turning to Trenderhoof. "I hope my servants haven't caused too much distress."

"She'll be fine," he assured her. "My sister can be a bit…dramatic."

"And I am so sorry the past two meals weren't satisfactory for your taste. Perhaps you could suggest the main course for dinner?"

Fluttershy cringed at the thought of having another meal with their two awful guests. She couldn't bear to sit through another one of Trenderhoof's anecdotes or Sunset's temper tantrums. Her meals with Discord had always been much more pleasant.

Then she had an idea.

"Um…Auntie?"

"What?" Starlight said abruptly, as if just remembering she was there.

Fluttershy bit her lip. "I, um…forgot to tell you that…Count Discord's back in town and…he invited me to dinner tonight."

"Count Discord?" Trenderhoof asked.

"A friend of ours," Starlight explained. "A rich but reclusive noblestallion who owns a castle in the wood."

"A castle!" he exclaimed, rubbing his chin. "You don't say. Perhaps he wouldn't mind if my sister and I joined you?"

"Oh, uh," Fluttershy stammered, "actually, he…only wanted…me to come."

Even with Discord's hypnotic powers, she needed some time away from all of them.

"When did you even receive this invitation?" Starlight demanded.

"Uh…this morning?"

"I don't remember any pony coming to our door."

"It was in a letter! Addressed to me! So, naturally, I…was the only one who read it."

Starlight sighed. "Well, this is on short notice, but…"

"I told you, Auntie, he just wants me to join him."

"Don't tell me you're going there *alone* ?! Not *again* !"

"Again?" Trenderhoof questioned, cocking his head.

"I could have Double Diamond or Party Favor escort me!" Fluttershy suggested.

At least those two weren't unpleasant company.

Starlight still looked disapproving, but she sighed in surrender. "Alright, Double Diamond can take you, but Night Glider will accompany you too!"

Fluttershy could tell she didn't want her alone in the forest with two stallions. She didn't want to cause a scandal.

"I hope you don't mind my niece not joining us this evening, Count Trenderhoof," Starlight said apologetically.

"That's quite alright," Trenderhoof smiled, though there was a hint of apprehension in his voice. "I was going to meet my business partner tonight anyway. I could dine at his place, but my sister can keep you company, doamnă."

Starlight put on a grin that looked just as forced as his. "Oh, splendid! I just… *adore* your sister!"

Trenderhoof set down his cup, which was still full. "Would you excuse me for a moment? I'm just going to inform my sister about this."

He kept up his smile until he was down the hall. His eyes darkened as he trotted up the stairs and to Sunset's room. He opened the door and Sunset shrieked in horror as she pressed a purple dress against her chest in an attempt to cover up as much of her undergarments as possible.

"Ever heard of knocking?!"

"Oh please," Trenderhoof chuckled as she shut the door. "As if there's any part of you I haven't seen."

Nevertheless, Sunset ducked behind a dressing screen while Aria smiled to herself.

"Anyway, darling," he said, walking to the window, "we have a slight problem."

"What's the matter?" Sunset snickered. "Can't keep your latest catch ensnared?"

Trenderhoof gritted his teeth together in annoyance. "Apparently, the Lady Fluttershy is having dinner with a Count Discord this evening…alone."

"Count Discord?" Aria said. "I've heard of him. The servants here won't stop gossiping about him. Apparently, Lady Fluttershy's gone to his castle for dinner five times." She lowered her voice. "The first time *without* an escort."

"Ooh," Sunset taunted as she emerged from behind the screen. "Looks like *you've* got competition… *brother* !"

"Shut up!" Trenderhoof shouted before turning back to Aria. "What else did you hear?"

Aria shrugged. "The stallion's rarely seen, that's why he's such a big deal here, but those two idiot male servants said he was quite the looker."

He winced. "And…exactly where does he stand with…Lady Fluttershy?"

She gestured for him to come closer and whispered, "I heard the skittish maid say that the Count had asked Lady Fluttershy to marry him."

"What?!"

"But she said no, yet she still sees him."

Trenderhoof growled in fury. There was no mistaking that blush in her cheeks when she had mentioned Count Discord. This was more than just a mere friendship.

Sunset Shimmer was laughing her head off.

"Oh, this is just too wonderful! The almighty Don Juan's latest conquest is seeing another stallion! Another *count* , for that matter! How rich is he, Aria? Do you know?"

"Well," Aria said, "that pegasus maid said that some ponies say he can make gold appear out of thin air."

This made the noblemare laugh even harder. " *And* he's loaded! Oh, suppose word gets out that you're flat out broke! She'll *have* to marry this Count Discord then!"

"Silence!" Trenderhoof commanded.

Even though she didn't will it, her mouth closed shut. Trenderhoof took a deep, calming breath.

"This is only a minor setback. They're not engaged yet. However, it seems I will have to romance Lady Fluttershy, after all."

Sunset scowled. " *What* ?!"

"She's in love with this count! Even if her aunt disapproves of the match, young lovers are very stubborn. You of all mares should know that."

Sunset folded her hooves. "What about this Count Discord? Even if you do manage to win the pathetic little pegasus' heart, he might get in the way."

"Simple. We just distract him with a… *prettier* face."

He cupped Sunset's chin. She backed away.

"Oh no! No, no, no, *no* ! I am *not* seducing another stallion for you again!"

"Why not? I seduced all those mares for *you* ."

She huffed. "Yeah, right, for *me* ."

"Look, you don't have to lay with him or anything, just…entertain him enough for him to divert his attention from the Lady Fluttershy. And

hey, you can drink him when you're done."

"That's not going to be easy," said Aria. "According to the servants, Count Discord's supposed to be a recluse. He never leaves his castle or invites any pony up there. Lady Fluttershy was an exception, it would seem."

"My, my, my," Sunset smirked as she admired her hooficure. "She must be *pretty* special to him then."

"This changes nothing!" Trenderhoof barked. "We *will* get Lady Fluttershy's inheritance!" He smiled and placed his hooves on Sunset's shoulders. "Perhaps we could get Count Discord's too…"

"Don't even think about it!" Sunset hissed, flashing her fangs at him.

"Alright, alright!" He grinned at Aria. "I suppose one of the Dazzlings would be up for the task…"

"What?! Are you saying I can't handle it?!"

Trenderhoof shrugged. "Well, if you can't do it, the Dazzlings might actually be more successful…"

"I'll do it, alright?! I'll do it!"

"But how are you even going to get near the Count Discord?" Aria asked. "He never sees any pony, remember?"

"Except for the Lady Fluttershy," Trenderhoof sneered. "I'm sure he wouldn't refuse an invitation from her. All she has to do is invite him to have dinner here with us."

"And how are we supposed to do that?" Sunset demanded. "Just walk right up to her and ask her to invite him?"

"Sunset, Sunset, Sunset. You forget my powers of persuasion."

"Then why don't you use them more often? Have her fall in love with you and have it done and over with?"

Trenderhoof winced and ground his teeth together. "I *told* you that

would spoil the *fun* !"

"Aw, poor baby!" Sunset said with a mocking pout. "Or are your 'powers of persuasion' just not what they used to be?"

He darted his red eyes at her. "One more snarky comment out of you and I'll have the Dazzlings rip you apart!"

A grin sprouted on Aria's face, which on her looked horrifying. "Ooh, I like that idea!"

Sunset's jaw dropped in appalment. Then she huffed and stormed out of the room towards the nearest lavatory. Using her magic, she simultaneously slammed the door and switched on the faucet. She scooped up the running water in her hooves and splashed it on her face. Then she took deep breaths, anything to calm herself down.

She looked up into the mirror and saw nothing but the wall behind her. It had been ten years since she had seen herself. Was she even still beautiful? How pathetic did she look now as her face dripped with water?

One thing she knew for sure: her eyes were turning red. She could feel the fire rising to her face as she gazed at the empty glass before her.

She cried out in fury and her horn exploded with green, shattering the mirror into pieces.

Coco Pommel came rushing in. She gasped when she saw the bits of glass scattered across the floor.

"Domnişoară, what happened?"

Sunset bit her lip anxiously as she glanced between the maid and the mess. Thinking quickly, she scowled at the former.

"Look what you've done, you ninny!" she bellowed. "Clean this up at once!"

Coco blinked. "But I didn't…"

"Now! Or I'll tell your mistress you broke the mirror!"

The maid gulped and set to work. Sunset snorted at her but as she left the lavatory, she sniffed and wiped away a trickle of blood from her cheek.

Fluttershy insisted on getting herself ready for her dinner with Discord. She was still thinking about how shocked her aunt had been when she had shut her bedroom door on her. Fluttershy was in such excitement, running to and fro between her closet and vanity. She wanted to look her best for Discord, having not seen him in so long. She had felt embarrassed about being in her nightdress when he returned to her. Her hair must have been a mess!

She finally decided on a simple blue gown that brought out her eyes and put on the butterfly necklace he had given her. As she started on her hair, she began to realize how silly she was being.

"Oh, look at me, Angel!" she laughed, glancing at her bunny in the mirror. "Here I am, worrying about how I look, all over some male!"

She blushed at the very idea. "I suppose I should've told him in advance I was coming, but won't he be delighted when I surprise him?"

Angel crossed his arms.

"He *won't* hurt me, Angel. I'll be fine on my own. Do you think I should tie my mane up or leave it down? I'd look more mature if I put it up, but he so likes it when I let it loose. Oh, but I don't want him to think I'm being too forward…"

Angel rolled his eyes and hopped under the bed, grunting, *I don't know you anymore, mare!*

By the time she was done, it was nearly seven o'clock, which meant it had taken her almost two hours to prepare!

"Goodness, I'm becoming my aunt!" she exclaimed as she raced downstairs.

Starlight and Night Glider were waiting, the maid dressed in her evening gown and shawl. Trenderhoof and Sunset were there too, for no reason presumably other than to see her off.

"Oh, you look beautiful, domnişoară!" Night Glider exclaimed.

"Indeed," Trenderhoof observed.

He ignored the pressure Sunset was exerting on his hoof.

"You certain this is wise?" Starlight asked skeptically.

"I will be fine, Auntie," Fluttershy assured her. "Double Diamond and Night Glider will make sure of that."

"She's in good hooves, doamnă," Night Glider said as she hooked her foreleg with Fluttershy's. "Now come on! Diamond's waiting outside."

"Just a moment!" Trenderhoof called before they could make it out the door. "I'd like a word with Lady Fluttershy, if you please."

Fluttershy nodded to the maid, allowing her to go on without her. "Yes, domnule?"

He smiled kindly. "Are you sure my sister and I can't join you this evening? We wouldn't be a bother."

"Oh, I'm sorry, but…Count Discord doesn't like strangers and…"

"But I'm no stranger," he said, cupping her chin so she would look directly into his eyes. "He can trust me." His eyes slowly changed into spirals. " *You* can trust me."

Fluttershy blinked as the count appeared to be staring blankly at her. It was making her feel awkward.

"Sorry, domnule," she said, stepping away, "but I must respect the Count's wishes."

Trenderhoof was abashed beyond comprehension as the mare went out to join her servants. Sunset was in a fit of hysterical laughter.

"Oh, *brilliantly* done, *brother* ! Getting her to fall for you will be *easy* !"

"Shut up!" Trenderhoof commanded. "I don't understand. She should've fallen immediately under my power…"

His partner smirked. "Maybe you've lost your touch, *dear* ."

He scowled at her. "Fine! We'll learn about Count Discord some other way. Follow her. See where he lives, and how close he is with Lady Fluttershy."

She crossed her forelegs. "What do you take me for? Some *lackey* ?! Have one of your concubines or your guard dog spy on her!"

Trenderhoof wasn't in the mood to argue, so he growled firmly, "Go. *Now* !"

Sunset flinched as she felt a sudden pain in her head. "Ugh! Alright, alright!"

She glanced down the streets to see if any pony was around. Once it was safe, she sprouted her wings and took to the skies.

"Honestly! The things I do for this stallion!"

Dangers

"Okay, so did the Count *really* invite you or not?"

Fluttershy looked up at Night Glider in surprise. They had been in the carriage for but a minute and already the maid was on her case.

"W-What are you…?"

"Oh, come on!" Night Glider huffed. "My family has served yours for years. You really think anything goes on in the house without my knowledge? I *know* no letters were sent to you this morning. So… why did you lie to your aunt?"

Fluttershy glanced down at her twiddling hooves. "I…um….well…"

"Aw, you can tell me, young mistress. I can keep a secret from your aunt. Can't promise I won't tell Sugar Belle, though. So tell me," she said, leaning forward expectantly, "what exactly is going on between you and Count Discord?"

Fluttershy was now blushing sheepishly. "Uh…I…"

She examined Night Glider's bright smile and excited, but kind eyes. She had known the maid all her life, and even if she was a gossip, she trusted she wouldn't let word get to her aunt, and she needed to confide in some pony even remotely close.

"Okay," Fluttershy whispered. "The truth is…I just didn't want to spend any more time with Count Trenderhoof or his sister."

Night Glider smirked. "Can't stand 'em either, huh? Don't blame ya. That Trenderhoof's a bore, and that Sunset *Simmer* throws tantrums like a foal! I did *not* drop tea on her! I swear one of her horrid maids tripped me!"

"They make me uncomfortable," Fluttershy admitted timidly.

"Don't they?! Even when they gossip with us they act so high and

mighty, as if they're better than us! Like they're… *royal* servants or something!"

She smiled again at her mistress. "They were pretty interested in the Count Discord too, but I won't give them any juicy tidbits you give me. They don't deserve my colorful conversation starters. So come on! What's your deal with him? Coco said he proposed to you. Do you… *love* him?"

Fluttershy looked away, trying to hide her grin. "I…I *might* , but…"

Night Glider squealed and clapped her hooves. "I knew it, I knew it! Why else would you seek refuge at his place? Your aunt's crazy to be trying to set you up with some stiff, when there's a *real* stallion waiting for you in the woods!"

She glanced out the window and then smiled mischievously at her mistress. "You know, I can arrange for the two of you to have some… *alone* time."

"What?!" Fluttershy squeaked. "I…I *couldn't* ! What would Auntie say if she knew you left me alone with…?"

"I'll cover for you, don't worry."

"But what about Double Diamond? You know how loyal he is to Auntie. He would never disobey her…"

"Just leave him to me," the maid said, flipping her mane. "Believe me. I know how to get a stallion to…bend the rules a bit. You just have your fun with the Count, but be careful. Your aunt would *really* give us the sack if you were suddenly found with child."

If Fluttershy's face were any redder, it might explode. "Oh my! No, no! We don't…at least, we don't talk about…"

"I'm just teasing, domnişoară! Though seriously, it's best to avoid a scandal." She glanced out the window at the stallion pulling the carriage. "We servants, however, have a little more…leeway."

Fluttershy wanted to ask what she meant by that but they had already reached their destination and so Double Diamond brought

them to a complete stop.

"I'll get out first," Night Glider said, confidently adjusting her bodice, "and give him a little… *talk* ."

As the maid stepped out of the coach, Fluttershy leaned out to see what she was up to. Night Glider walked casually up to Double Diamond. They were speaking in such low voices that Fluttershy couldn't hear them, but she saw the stallion give the maid a disapproving glare. Then she whispered in his ear and his white face turned red. After a few more murmurs, he finally nodded dumbly. Night Glider smeared her hooves together, as if she had just finished her morning chores early.

"It's official now," she said proudly. "We'll be out of your mane and come and collect you around…a quarter to eleven?"

"What in the world did you say to him?" Fluttershy asked.

The maid smirked. "Now *that* is *my* little secret." She opened the carriage door before her mistress could question further. "Step lightly, milady! Your Prince Charming awaits!"

Fluttershy thanked Night Glider as she helped her step out and then quickly replaced her in the carriage.

" *Bună seara* !" she waved as Double Diamond started them off.

Once they were out of sight, Fluttershy excitedly rushed to the castle front door. She knocked and waited. How would he react once he saw her? What should they do together? Should they have dinner like always? She blushed as she recalled her maid's insinuations.

"No, no, *much* too soon."

Then she thought back to last night, lightly running her hoof over her lips at the memory. She had never kissed anyone before and though it had been brief, just the fleeting touch of physical contact had been enough to make her heart skip a beat. Her lips tingled as she replayed it over and over in her head and longed for the memory to be real again.

The opening of the door snapped her out of her thoughts. Fluttershy hastily smoothed out her skirts and put on a bright smile. But it wasn't Discord at the door, but Twilight, who seemed to be in a great deal of distress.

"Fluttershy?" she croaked. "W-What are you doing here?"

"I know I came uninvited," Fluttershy said as she stepped forth, "but I wanted to surprise…"

Twilight obstructed her path. "You can't be here!"

The pegasus blinked at her strange behavior. The vampires had always welcomed her before.

"Why not?"

"Now is just not a good time," Twilight said.

Her eyes were lowered, aimed at Fluttershy's neck. The unicorn shook her dark thoughts away.

"You'll have to come back tomorrow. Where's your carriage?"

"I, um, sent it away," Fluttershy explained. "See, I…wanted Discord and I to be…"

"He's not here."

"What?"

"He's…hunting. It's a feeding night for us. We're all very thirsty and…it's not safe for you here."

She tried to close the door on her, but Fluttershy held out her hoof.

"But my carriage won't be back until a quarter to eleven! I can't just trot back home!"

Twilight considered this. It was dangerous for her master's beloved to be in a castle of thirsty vampires. None of them would intentionally harm her, of course, but the tempting smell of her could

arouse the bloodthirsty beasts within them. Just being in her presence was already making Twilight's mouth water. However, she couldn't send Fluttershy home on her own. The predators of the forest would not show as much restraint.

"Alright," Twilight murmured as she let her in, using the door as a safeguard between them.

"I don't wish to be of any inconvenience," Fluttershy assured her.

"You're forgiven," Twilight said, hastily shutting the door. "Follow me."

She galloped at such a speed that Fluttershy could hardly keep up. As she raced ahead of the pegasus, Twilight was trying so hard not to give into the intoxicating smell, not understanding how the Master could stand to be so near her all the time. Without her charm, she wasn't sure how long she could contain herself.

She led her guest to the drawing room and checked first to see if any pony was within.

"Wait here, domnişoară," Twilight squeaked. "I will send Spike to keep you company."

She fled before Fluttershy could even enter the room. It was lavishly decorated, and Fluttershy could guess Rarity had had something to do with it. The furniture was burgundy and adorned with lace. A cabinet filled with exquisite china stood in the corner. Fluttershy couldn't imagine what vampires would need with china, but then figured it was just as ornamental as the rest of the room.

A grand piano sat by the door, the lid open. Fluttershy brushed her hooves along the white wooden keys, thinking back to when Discord had first played for her. She smiled to think of how frightened she had been, and how far she and Discord had come along since then.

The door opened and Fluttershy greeted the little dragon with a grin. He was rubbing his eyes tiredly.

"Don't get me wrong," he grumbled. "It's very nice to see you, Fluttershy, but feeding time for the vampires usually means naptime

for me."

"Terribly sorry," Fluttershy said.

"Eh, don't worry about it," Spike said as he plopped onto a divan. "It's just with them staying up all night and sending me on errands in the daytime too, a dragon's gotta sleep at *some* point!"

"How often do they feed?" Fluttershy asked as she sat beside him.

He shrugged. "The way Twilight explains it is that vampires don't digest their food as quickly as ponies or dragons. They can go longer without food and don't usually get thirsty for about three days. The most they can go is about a week."

Fluttershy frowned as a distressing thought occurred to her. "Aren't you endangered too? I mean Twilight said they were all thirsty and… don't you have blood too?"

"Aw, I don't worry about them." He glanced around and whispered, "Actually, between you and me, there's a reason I stay in my room when every pony gets…antsy."

He reached into his shirt and pulled out an amulet of a golden sun.

"I've seen something like that before," Fluttershy said. "A gyp— Romane mare was wearing it."

"It's a symbol of Celestia, the sun goddess," Spike explained. "She used to be the prominent goddess of the Romane, though some still remain loyal to her. Her symbol is said to ward off demons, because they fear the sun. Not that I think any of the girls are demons or anything! This is just…precaution. I also keep garlic and stakes stuffed in my bed, just in case. After what happened with Pinkie, you can never be too careful."

He slipped the amulet back in and murmured, "But don't tell the Master or the girls about this. I don't want them thinking I don't trust them."

Fluttershy nodded. "I understand. I don't think any of them would really want to hurt you."

"Of course not. I mean Twilight's like my big sister, but…well, with her being so new to all this, it's hard for her to keep her…new personality in check sometimes. Even Rarity and Rainbow, who have been at this for almost a hundred years, can lose their cool sometimes.

"Honestly," he smiled, "the only one I really trust around me under these circumstances is Applejack."

Fluttershy raised an eyebrow. "Applejack?"

"Oh, yeah. She's tougher than all of them put together. She's the one who draws blood from my arm when needed and the one who divides up the carca—"

He paused when he saw Fluttershy's pale expression. "Anyway, I know she may seem moody, but if you knew what she went through, you'd understand."

"Why won't any pony tell me what happened to her? And why does she hate me so much?"

"She doesn't *hate* you. Applejack doesn't hate anybody. Well, except for…"

He bit his lip, suggesting to Fluttershy that he had already revealed too much.

"You know?" he piped, hopping off the couch. "In all the times you've come here, you've never heard me play the piano! The Master's been teaching me, you know."

"I'd love to hear you play," Fluttershy said warmly as she watched the dragon skitter to the piano bench.

He sat down and was ready to play when he got an idea "Um…if you don't mind me asking, domnişoară, I heard rumors that you… sing?"

Fluttershy blushed out of embarrassment. "Oh, uh…a little, but…I'm not very good."

"I doubt that. You have a sweet voice even when you speak!"

She smiled sheepishly. "Oh but I…I don't really sing in front of ponies."

He gestured to himself. "I'm not a pony. Besides, it's just me. And I'm just learning the piano myself. What do I know about musical talent?"

His grin was assuring, and childishly adorable. She doubted this sweet little dragon could ever ridicule her, no matter how horrible she was.

"Well…alright. What songs do you know?"

"She's *what* ?!" Applejack exclaimed when all the vampire maidens were gathered in the dining room.

"I couldn't just leave her out in the woods!" Twilight insisted.

"But…if she's here, then…" Rainbow stammered.

"I'M THIRSTY!" Pinkie hollered. "I don't wanna kill Fluttershy!"

"It will be alright," Rarity breathed, though she was clearly panicking too. "We just…have to be strong and…avoid her at all costs. Where is she now?"

"I left her in the drawing room with Spike," Twilight replied.

"Spike's out of his room?!" Applejack shrieked. "Now?! Are you out of your mind?! He could get hurt! He could…"

"Look! The Master will be back soon! Like Rarity said. We'll just avoid the drawing room until he comes back with dinner."

Applejack let out a huff of air. "Has the lady dined yet?"

"I don't think so."

"She'll be getting hungry too. Well, we should still have some fruit in

the cupboard. I'll see what I can whip up."

Every pony stared at her in surprise.

"I thought you didn't like Fluttershy," Pinkie said, cocking her head.

"I never said I didn't like her," Applejack replied steadily. "However I feel about this whole business, I'm not letting the filly go hungry."

As she disappeared into the kitchen, the other mares were left to wait in silent agony. Rainbow bit down so hard on her lip that blood trickled her chin. Pinkie started chewing on her own leg and found it surprisingly tasty. Rarity had to knock the sense back into her before she could devour herself entirely. After a long while, Twilight stood up from the table.

"And where are you going?" Rarity asked.

"To get some air," Twilight replied harshly. "I need to clear my head."

Sunset was perched on a tall oak tree, watching the dark castle impatiently. Nothing had happened since the Lady Fluttershy had entered it and she was getting bored. She was almost tempted to follow the servants, who had gone off to do who knows what, but knew it would anger Trenderhoof if she attacked them. They had agreed feeding on some pony so close to their hosts would throw suspicion on them. He would also be furious if she failed at her task.

Unfortunately, she could not infiltrate the fortress, thanks to the stupid law that prevented vampires from entering one's home without invitation. The castle's few windows were drawn, so she couldn't see inside, and the stone walls were too thick for even her exceptional ears to listen through.

So she was stuck here, on this sorry branch, left with nothing to do but wait and ponder on this peculiar scene. Why would the Lady Fluttershy send her servants away? Why did she seem unafraid to be without an escort? It was easy to conclude that her relationship with Count Discord was an intimate one.

Who was this Count Discord? What did he look like? And why did he live in such a reclusive location? And why did he have so few windows?

She nearly fell out of the tree as the front door finally made a sound. She looked down and saw a lavender unicorn mare exiting the castle. She recognized her as the mare who had let the lady in. She had to be a servant to be answering the door like that, but she wasn't dressed for the part. Her gown was elegant and slightly revealing as it had curious cuts on the sides.

The unicorn walked past the gate, not seeming to pay heed to the potential danger of the deep woods. Sunset decided to tail her. Whoever she was, she was part of Count Discord's household and might have some information.

Also, Trenderhoof hadn't said anything about snacking on *other* ponies' servants.

Meanwhile, Twilight was breathing in the sweet scents of birch and oak, using Zecora's meditative tricks to clear her mind of bloody thoughts. As she released the air from her lungs, she could feel the effect already.

But when she inhaled again, she froze. Something about the air had changed. Among the birch and oak, there was something else. The smell was familiar, and yet strange.

She perked up her ears and used her vampire hearing to assess her surroundings. She heard a sway from a nearby tree and then the flapping of heavy wings.

Before Twilight could react, the intruder caught her from behind, hooking one foreleg over her neck and the other around her middle, pressing her firmly to another pony's body. She could smell the stolen pony blood in her attacker's cold breath and could feel the fangs just inches away from her neck. She heard a zap and her horn went numb.

"If you scream," a low, female voice hissed, "you die. And don't bother casting any spells. You're a bit…handicapped at the

moment."

Twilight remained still. It was obviously another vampire that was holding her. Not a very clever one, for she couldn't tell she had apprehended one of her kind. Twilight decided to use that ignorance against her and pretended to be petrified with fear.

She had to be a unicorn too, but what Twilight couldn't figure out was how she had numbed her horn. She silently tried magic but it didn't work. She had never heard of a spell that could block magic like this. Had it not been for her sticky situation, she would've been impressed.

Her assailant chuckled. "You're a pretty one, I'll give you that. I'll bet you taste good."

She breathed teasingly on her neck, making Twilight shiver regardless of her lack of dread.

"But I need some information from you. You work for the Count Discord, yes?"

Twilight stiffened at the mention of her master. "W-Why do you want to know? Who are you?"

She choked as the attacker put more pressure on her throat. Usually this wouldn't harm her, if the foreleg didn't have godlike strength.

"You his servant? Sister? Daughter? Niece? Mistress?"

That thought put a disgusting taste in her mouth.

"Here's the deal, sweetie. You tell me everything you know about the Count Discord, and I won't suck you dry. That's a fair trade, don't you think? Your life for a teensy bit of information?"

Twilight responded with silence. The assailant shook her furiously.

"Answer me! Look, you don't have to tell me much! Just tell me about his relationship with the Lady Fluttershy!"

So not only did this vampire know of her master, but she knew of

Fluttershy. Twilight was beginning to see the danger of her position. For some reason, another vampire, possibly a non-local one, was interested in Fluttershy. Whatever the reason, in loyalty to her master it was her duty to protect the mare.

But she couldn't use her magic. Twilight mentally cursed Rainbow for being right. Then she remembered the self-defense techniques she had taught her. What had she said about being grabbed from behind?

Use whatever you can for leverage.

"Come on, I don't have all night!" the attacker hissed between her teeth.

Twilight turned her head slightly so she could see her smirk. "You need to work on your sense of smell, cousin."

"Huh?"

Sunset shrieked as a pair of purple bat wings popped out of the unicorn's back, sending her backward. Twilight, now in her full form, spun around and crouched down low, growling at the stranger.

She was an attractive young mare, even in her batty state, dressed fashionably too, at least in a way that was inappropriate for hunting. And there was something familiar about her flaming red and yellow hair.

Sunset was caught off-guard by her victim's surprising move and gaped at the lavender bat-pony snarling at her. Her horn started glowing pink as the spell cast on her wore off. Despite her shock, Sunset quickly recovered and mirrored her opponent.

They slowly, methodically circled each other like two wolves from different packs. Twilight now understood the territorial instinct of vampires, as anger towards this trespasser seethed within her.

Sunset was the first to speak.

"Well," she smirked. "I must say you got one on me. That rarely happens."

Twilight narrowed her blood red eyes. "This is *our* hunting ground, and you're intruding."

"Our?" Sunset said, raising a knowing eyebrow. "You mean there are more of you?" She chuckled throatily. "Fancy that. Another cozy coven in Tramplevania. Now, is it just you at that dreary old castle or is every pony there a vampire?"

Twilight didn't answer. Vampires only revealed the identities of others when the receiver was trustworthy. So far, this one hadn't exhibited that trait.

"Is Count Discord your master? Every coven has a master. Tell me. Are you one of his concubines?"

Steam escaped Twilight's nostrils as she stamped her hoof. "I belong to *no one* ! *Especially* not a male!"

Sunset blinked back in astonishment, almost impressed with her defiance. She didn't let her vulnerability linger, however, and resumed her prowling position.

"But he is, isn't he? *Someone* created you. Does he plan to do the same to Lady Fluttershy?"

"Lady Fluttershy is none of your concern!" Twilight spat. "And unless you want to start a clan war, I suggest you leave this forest immediately!"

Sunset sneered. "You still haven't answered my question, so you're obviously hiding something."

Twilight grunted as dangerous sparks emitted from her horn. "Want to see what I'm like *with* magic?"

But her opponent only leered further. "I like you. You've got spunk."

The lavender vampire threateningly stepped forward.

"Okay, okay!" Sunset said, holding up her hooves in surrender. "Didn't mean to get your mane in a tangle! I'll leave! But mark my words, girlie. This won't be the last time we'll meet."

She shot up into the air and Twilight watched her dark silhouette disappear above the treetops. Transforming back into her pony self, she began analyzing what had just happened. A foreign vampire had inquired about Discord and Fluttershy. Twilight doubted the stranger had been doing this out of her own interests. Nomadic vampires were as rare as lone wolves, for there was always strength in numbers. She had to be working for some pony, a master or mistress. She had been right. Every coven had a leader.

But what would another clan want with Fluttershy?

The sound of hoofsteps put Twilight back into animal mode. She spun around and snarled in the direction of the sound. Discord recoiled in surprise.

"Whoa, whoa there, Twilie!" he chuckled, holding up his paw. "It's just me!"

Twilight sighed in relief and retracted her wings. "Apologies, Master, I thought you were some pony else."

He was carrying a heavy sack. From what Twilight could smell it was lynx, and her mouth began moistening again. He raised his eyebrow at her curiously.

"What are you doing out here anyway?"

"I needed some air," Twilight replied quickly. "Listen, I'm starving, so why don't we head back to the castle?"

They walked back together and Twilight glanced around and up at the sky cautiously.

"What are you so shaken up about?" Discord asked.

Twilight moved closer so she could whisper. "Not a minute before you showed up, I was…attacked."

"Attacked? You? Twilight, I know you're new at this, but I thought you had spells to…"

"No, no, it wasn't just some random creature of the forest. She got

me from behind with…"

"She?"

"A vampire. She put this spell on my horn to temporarily block my magic. It was quite remarkable, actually. I'd never seen anything like it."

Discord cocked his head at Twilight's odd expression of admiration. She shook herself out of it.

"Anyway, she was asking about you…and Fluttershy."

That stopped him in his tracks. "She knows about Fluttershy?"

"I didn't tell her anything! Not even after I showed myself to her. I didn't say you were my master, but I did tell her to stay away from Fluttershy and that she was trespassing on our territory."

She bit her lip anxiously. "Master, I think there might be another vampire coven in Zebiu."

Discord stroked his beard in thought. "You might be right."

"What should we do?"

He shrugged. "Nothing for the moment. If this stranger *is* part of another coven, so far they pose no threat to us. Thanks to you, they probably know now to avoid our territory. The last thing any vampire wants is a clan war."

"But what about Fluttershy? The stranger didn't just mention her by name, but asked what your relationship was with her. Fluttershy doesn't have to worry about us, but she's powerless against other vampires."

"If you come across her again, tell her that she has already been claimed. She'll understand."

"Oh, yes. That reminds me. Fluttershy's at the castle."

He froze. " *What* ?! Why didn't you tell me that first?!"

He flapped his wings and flew the rest of the way, bursting through the door and zooming into the dining room where the other girls were waiting.

"Is it true?" he demanded, dropping the sack. "Is Fluttershy here?!"

"Apparently she surprised us with a visit," Rarity explained. "Spike's keeping her company in the drawing room and Applejack's fixing her something to eat."

He paced back and forth. "Oh, what do I do?! I'm unprepared! And of all nights it had to be tonight when I just…"

Rarity slapped him out of it. "Get a grip on yourself!" She got out a handkerchief and wiped his mouth. "All you got to do is get a clean shirt and get rid of all this blood."

As Rarity cleansed his face, Discord used his magic to replace his ripped up shirt and cape with a neatly pressed suit. The unicorn smiled and took a step back to examine him.

"There we go. She'd never guess you were out marauding in the woods."

"Can we eat now?" Pinkie whined as she sniffed the bag.

"Dig in," Discord said, backing out of the room, "just stay in here and don't let Fluttershy see you feeding!"

As he smoothed out his mane, Discord had never wished for a reflection more. If Fluttershy knew just what he had been up to, she would…

He paused when he heard a peculiar sound. It was soft, but clear, strange, but soothing. He had never heard anything sweeter. It grew louder as he approached the drawing room and cautiously creaked the door open.

Spike was at the piano, playing one of the simple tunes Discord had taught him, but it was the second source of music that had captured the draconequus' interest. The most beautiful melody was coming from Fluttershy's open mouth as she sang along with the piano.

He was transfixed, frozen as if every part of his body had shut down. The only sign that he was alive was a thump in his chest. Her voice was enough to awaken a heart that had been undead for a millennium.

Fluttershy's shriek snapped him out of his trance, making him fall through the doorway.

"Sorry!" he exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "I didn't mean to startle you!"

"No, it's not that!" Fluttershy gasped. "You're…you're bleeding!"

Discord was suddenly aware of the cool beads of blood dripping down his face. He chuckled as he wiped them away.

"Oh, that's nothing to worry about, my dear. Those are just tears."

She frowned. "Tears?"

"I suppose we forgot to mention that vampires cry blood. See, we lack the bodily fluids of mortal creatures, even water, so our tears are made of blood."

Fluttershy's shock was now becoming concern. "Why were you crying then? Is something wrong?"

He smiled warmly at her. "Nothing's wrong, darling. In fact, it was your beautiful voice that was the cause of these tears."

"Oh," she blushed, glancing down at the floor. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" he scoffed. "Why would you be sorry? Fluttershy, I've…I've never heard something so…so…"

He could not find the words. "Would you sing again?"

"W-What?" Fluttershy squeaked.

"Only this time," Discord said as he lightly shoved Spike off the bench and took his place, "I'll accompany you."

"Oh no, I couldn't…not while you're…

"Come now, Fluttershy. Don't you trust me?"

Their eyes met and Fluttershy could not deny the sincerity and hopefulness in his gaze.

"I, um…I haven't prepared anything…"

"Do you know this song?"

Discord played a few cords and Fluttershy's shyness melted away as she recognized them and nodded excitedly. He started again and she belted out in that heavenly instrument of hers:

" *There's music in the treetops,*

And there's music in the vale… "

He didn't pay attention to the words she was singing, just the sound of them exiting her sweet mouth. For a moment, his gaze lingered on her small lips, thinking about the tasteful sample he had received last night. He had lain awake all day thinking of it, yearning to taste her sweetness again, but make it last longer this time.

He had been so lost in thought that he had forgotten to continue playing.

"Something wrong?" Fluttershy asked in confusion.

"Oh, no!" he quickly exclaimed. "No, I…I just…that was…you're so…so…"

He finished with a whisper, "Angelic."

They gazed at each other in silence. Spike took it as his cue to leave and resume his sleep.

It was so strange that after a week of not seeing Discord, Fluttershy had nothing to say to him. Her eyes kept flitting to his mouth, as did his to hers. Neither of them had forgotten.

They were leaning towards each other when Applejack opened the door.

"Oh, good," she sighed. "You're still here."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Discord asked.

"Nothing, Master!" she replied quickly. "Anyway, I wasn't sure whether or not you were hungry, milady, so I fixed ya a little something."

"Thank you, Applejack," Fluttershy said, mildly surprised. "As a matter of fact, I haven't had dinner."

"Want me to bring it in here?" she whispered to her master. "You know, since the dining room's unavailable at the moment?"

"Right," Discord said, tapping his chin. "Well…it's a beautiful night! Why don't you set it out on the terrace?"

"As you wish, Master."

She bowed and gave Fluttershy a steady look before setting out. Discord offered his paw to the maiden and she giggled as she allowed him to escort her.

Applejack brought out a small circular table and two chairs for the couple, setting out a cheese platter and a bowl of fruit for Fluttershy.

"This was the best I could do on short notice," the orange mare explained.

"It's lovely, thank you," Fluttershy said as Discord held a chair out for her.

"Would the lady like something to drink?"

"If you could just get me a glass of water, that would be fine."

Applejack bowed and left them alone again, but not without glancing cautiously over her shoulder. Discord eagerly sat across from his beloved.

"I must say, you coming here surprised me. Mind me asking why you decided to pop in? Not that I'm disappointed to see you!"

"Actually," Fluttershy blushed, "I wanted to see you."

Discord blinked. "You…wanted to see… *me* ?"

"Well," she said, glancing down guiltily, "that, and…" She looked up at him. "Don't be angry with me."

He shook his head. " *Never* ."

"To be honest, I…you see…there's this…count staying at my house…"

The draconequus stiffened. "Count? As in," he gulped, "a *stallion* ?"

"Yes. Count Trenderhoof of Bullarest."

He gripped the edge of the table as a pang of jealousy shot through him. He had heard of this count. He was rumored to be the handsomest and one of the wealthiest bachelors in the land, and had quite a reputation with the ladies.

"Is he, um," he choked, pretending to be interested in the stars, "good-looking?"

Fluttershy shrugged. "I suppose."

"Brilliant!" he grunted through his teeth.

His envy was obvious. Even Fluttershy could sense it. She couldn't blame him, for she already knew how protective he was over her. The mischievous mare deep inside her wanted to see how far his emotions would go.

"He's also very poetic," she said casually. "He came up with a poem just for me."

Discord huffed. "Poet, *schmoet* ! Anyone can make up lines that rhyme!"

She smirked teasingly at him. "Can *you* ?"

"Of course!"

She reached over and took his paw and claw. "Prove it."

He glanced down at her hooves and then at her, suddenly feeling very nervous.

"N-Now?"

Fluttershy nodded, and he could tell this was payback for putting her on the spot with the singing earlier. He gulped as he tried to think of something.

"Okay, um…you are…you're…"

He stumbled over his words and was sure she would ridicule him until he locked gaze with her and fell into her blue-green depths. They inspired him.

"Your eyes, are like…two gorgeous oceans, err, seas! Yes, and… gazing into them is like…gazing into…dreams?"

He winced at his poor rhyming skills, but opened his eyes when he felt her hoof raking up his lion arm.

"That was prettier than anything Trenderhoof could come up with."

He blinked in confusion. "Huh?"

She shook her head with a laugh. "Oh, Discord, did you really think I would fall for some pony like Count Trenderhoof?"

He bit his lip. "Well…you did say he was handsome."

"Well, sure. By pony standards, anyway. He's nice too, but he's so… so…dull. I know it's an unkind thing to say, but I just can't stand him!" She smiled at him. "That's why I came here tonight. The truth is, Discord…" She turned away to hide her blush. "I'd prefer your company any day."

His ears fluttered in excitement. "Then…do you think I'm… handsome?"

She leaned forward and whispered. "The *handsomest* ."

Overcome with emotion, he grabbed her by the shoulders and brought her lips towards his, but quickly remembered himself and stopped before they could touch. He looked down at her, seeing the shock in her face. Slowly, he began setting her down.

"I'm so sorry, Fluttershy, I wasn't…"

Snatching up his face, Fluttershy finished the job for him. If his heart had been functioning, it would've stopped at that moment. Once again, her action had frozen him stiff, but Fluttershy didn't pull away. She knew how much they both wanted this.

Eventually, Discord closed his eyes as he relaxed into her kiss and brought up his paw and claw so he could keep her in place. Fluttershy moaned as she felt his fingers comb through her mane. It was strange for him to think that a moment ago, these lips had tasted the blood of a dying animal, and now they were caressing the lips of the mare he loved.

A loud clang caused them to pull apart and turn to the mare in the doorway. Applejack's face had gone paler than usual as she stared at them in horror, not seeming to notice the tray and goblet she had dropped.

"Applejack!" Discord piped, rubbing the back of his neck. "Um, we were uh…we…"

"How could you?"

Her voice was low and cracked, like a volcano preparing for eruption.

"AJ, I…" Discord tried to say.

"How *could* you?!" she exploded. "How could you, after what he did to me?!"

"Applejack, I thought you understood that…"

"You promised! You promised you wouldn't take advantage of her! That you wouldn't…"

"He *didn't* take advantage of me, Applejack!" Fluttershy protested.

She blinked at her in alarm. "W-What?"

The pegasus blushed. "I…I kissed him."

This didn't make things better for the orange mare. She glanced between the two in disbelief.

"No," she uttered. "No, no, *no* ! You *can't* , Fluttershy!"

"W-Why not?" Fluttershy muttered nervously.

"It's just…just not right! You have so much to live for! It's just not right!"

"Applejack," Discord said, calmly holding out his claw to her.

But she turned away from him and ran inside sobbing.

"What was that all about?" Fluttershy asked. "What did she mean when she said: 'after what he did to me'?"

Discord sighed solemnly. "Applejack…has a complicated history."

"Was it the vampire that bit her?"

He paused. "Let's just say that…she doesn't want you to suffer like she did."

Fluttershy wasn't sure how to respond to that, so she started taking interest in her food and the rest of the evening was spent in awkward silence.

With winter just around the corner, the nights were getting chillier and soon there would be snow, which was why Scootaloo had to

find some permanent shelter soon, or at least some warm clothing. The one dress she'd been wearing for months since her mother's passing was so tattered and soiled through that she'd had to turn it inside out to look even remotely approachable. Ponies were less likely to spit at her when she had less dirt on her.

As usual, the streets were empty that evening, but the local tavern was alive with light and laughter. Most foals would be afraid to enter such a roughhouse, but Scootaloo was used to the noise of drunken, disgusting stallions and wasn't even fazed by the chair that had crashed over her head upon entering. She casually wove her way through the sea of alcoholics and to where the innkeeper was tending the counter.

"Hey, Pony Joe!"

The cream-colored unicorn stallion looked down at the filly standing on her hind legs and peering over the counter. He gave her a friendly smile.

" *Bună seara,* my little domnişoară. I'd offer you a drink, but you're not even supposed to be in here. Another crust of bread?"

"Actually, Joe," Scootaloo said, "I was hoping you could let me sleep here tonight."

He smirked as he polished an empty tankard. "You asking for a room?"

"Doesn't have to be a whole room. It's just a little cold out."

"I see. Well, you know the deal. If you help me clear the tables, I'll let you sleep in the corner." He winked as he tossed her a rag. "Do a good job and I might give you some bread."

"You've got it, domnule!"

Scootaloo spotted an empty table and began wiping it clean. She held her nose as she came across some remnants of indigested ale.

"I'm sorry, your lordship!" a voice with a thick foreign accent cried out. "But my business is caput! I was robbed by a band of gypsies!

I'm bankrupt!"

"We had a deal, Caballeron!"

For some reason, the second voice made the fur on Scootaloo's neck stand on end. She turned to her right and saw a finely dressed unicorn stallion arguing with a raggedy, gruff earth pony at a table in the corner. The latter was surrounded by three other homely stallions, all of whom were shivering in fear. It was odd, for the fine stallion didn't look very menacing. He was tall, but skinny. However, when Scootaloo caught sight of him, an alarm in her brain went off.

The unicorn pounded his hoof on the table furiously. "I *need* that money!"

"We don't have it!" the earth stallion, Caballeron, insisted. "Look at us! We've been forced to become beggars! Now we're no better than those gypsy scum!"

"You *are* gypsy scum!" the unicorn spat. "Just because you lot got lucky for a while, doesn't mean your blood has changed!"

Scootaloo's hooves tingled, urging her to run as far away from this stallion as possible.

" *I* got you that deal with the trading company! Now is the time to pay *your* end of the bargain!"

"What can we do?" Caballeron whined. "We have nothing!"

The unicorn gripped the earth stallion's cloak and Scootaloo felt it was time to follow her instincts. However, the noble colt relaxed and set his business associate down.

"Very well, old friend," he said calmly. "It's not your fault you were robbed. You are forgiven."

Caballeron sighed in relief as he and his friends stood up to go. "Oh, thank you, domnule! Thank you! You are truly a merciful stallion!"

Scootaloo's spine shivered as a mischievous smirk crawled up the unicorn's face and he looked to the door. She followed his gaze in

time to see three beautiful mares enter gracefully. Her mind went haywire as these seductive creatures glided across the room. She wasn't sure how she knew this, but something about them just wasn't…natural.

They obstructed the path of the four beggars. The mare with poofy orange hair caressed Caballeron's chin while the other two petted the others. They started singing, softly and sweetly, which confirmed Scootaloo's suspicions that they weren't ordinary mares.

"Any of your stallions looking for a good time?" the poofy-haired one whispered.

The beggars, of course, were no match for their spell.

"Well, uh…" Caballeron stammered, his face heating up. "We don't have any money…"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that," said the purple mare with two ponytails.

"Yeah," the blue one sniggered. "You don't have to worry about anything."

"Consider this a free sample."

All four stallions nodded excitedly. The three mares grinned in triumph as they led them out of the tavern. Before the poofy-haired one disappeared, she winked at the fine unicorn and he chuckled throatily.

Scootaloo had a feeling she was never going to see those four hooligans again. She knew what those three mares were. Somehow, she just knew. But what could she do? Even with her garlic necklace, she was too small to fight them. She couldn't even fly. Besides, if they knew that she knew their secret, they would target her next.

That was why when the unicorn stallion looked her way she hastily resumed her task of cleaning the table.

Bună seara=" Good evening"

So I couldn't use the crucifix as vampire repellent in this story for obvious reasons and replaced it with Celestia's symbol of the sun. Since vampires fear the sun, kinda made sense.

Do not own lyrics to "Music in the Treetops."

Questions

Sunset paced around her room, thinking of what she was going to tell Trenderhoof. He would be furious knowing she had abandoned her post. Perhaps he wouldn't discover that detail if he returned after Lady Fluttershy. That was another horrifying thought. What if Fluttershy didn't return at all? She was alone, without an escort, in a castle occupied by at least one vampire.

She had so many questions about her encounter with the lavender vampire maiden. Where there was one vampire, there was usually many, and Sunset was sure she belonged to a coven since she had said " *our* hunting ground." She obviously lived in the Count Discord's castle. Did that mean the Count was a vampire too? Was he her master? Was everyone in that castle a vampire?

Sunset knew better than to jump to conclusions. Her old mentor had told her to look at every possible answer before deciding on one. Just because Lavender, which Sunset had chosen to mentally call her for the time being, lived with Count Discord didn't mean he was a vampire too, or if he even knew about her. Trenderhoof had been nomadic for a while and had had to take disgraceful jobs to earn a living.

That still didn't explain who else was included in this "our." Did the rest of the clan live in the same dwelling as her? Did they have separate homes?

Was Lavender even a servant? Her gown had suggested otherwise. No master would ever let his servants dress in something so fine, so elegant, so revealing—unless he had other things on his mind. Even Trenderhoof insisted the Dazzlings dress modestly while on duty. She didn't look lowly enough to be a servant. Sunset recalled her demonstration of magic and strength. Though brief, it had been enough to show that Lavender was capable of holding her own.

I belong to no one! Especially not a male!

She didn't seem like the sort of mare who would have a master.

Could it be possible that *she* was the leader of her coven?

Either way, Sunset was fully aware of how this discovery would interfere with Trenderhoof's plans. Lavender had acted so territorial, especially at the mention of Lady Fluttershy.

Lady Fluttershy is none of your concern! And unless you want to start a clan war, I suggest you leave this forest immediately!

Even though Sunset had only been a vampire for a decade, she understood this territoriality that her kind tended to possess. She had never felt this way towards a land, but she had towards her mate, every time the Dazzlings or any other mare so much as looked at him. Crossing a vampire's path is never a good idea, even if you are a vampire yourself.

Whether Count Discord was a vampire or not, Lavender's clan was interested in Lady Fluttershy, as if they had a claim on her. Was she their next intended victim? With her servants gone, they had the perfect opportunity now. But if Sunset had heard correctly, Fluttershy had been seeing the Count for close to a month now. Why would they wait so long? Of course. He had expressed intentions of marrying her. He must be after her fortune too.

Trenderhoof would punish her for sure if another vampire had gotten to his conquest first.

A clan war wouldn't bode well for them. Sunset didn't know how many others were in this coven, or how strong they were. She certainly didn't want to test Lavender. She had actually gotten the upper hoof on Sunset, which, as she had said, rarely happened. Even as a mortal, she had bested all the colts who had dared challenged her. Adagio had challenged her on several occasions, once with her sisters at her side. None of them had been a match for Sunset.

And yet, this stranger, this mare who was scarcely her size, had outsmarted her. In the span of a few seconds, she had figured out her weakness. Sunset cursed her terrible sense of smell, which had carried over during her transformation. She should've figured out that mare was a vampire earlier!

But what truly amazed Sunset was how Lavender hadn't revealed herself right away. She had waited, perhaps to learn her intentions. Clever, since Sunset would've been more tactful had she known it wasn't a mortal she was dealing with.

"But not clever enough," she muttered to herself.

Lavender had revealed enough to let her know Lady Fluttershy was a mutual concern to both covens and that a conflict was likely to arise if either of them brought their fangs down upon her. If Trenderhoof didn't relinquish his claim now, the entire clan could be…

"What are you doing here?"

Sunset spun around in alarm as Trenderhoof suddenly stood before her. Eyes glaring dangerously at her, he used his magic to seal the door.

"Why aren't you watching the Lady Fluttershy like I told you?" he demanded.

"She…" Sunset squeaked. "She hasn't…returned yet?"

She gasped as Trenderhoof's magic took her by the throat and rammed her against the wall.

"If she had returned yet, would I be asking you these questions?!"

"Trend…" she choked. "I can explain…"

"You disobeyed me! No explanation can remedy that!"

"I *did* follow her, but…"

"What happened?!"

She tried to repel him with her magic, but the pressure on her throat made it difficult for her to concentrate.

"She came…" she wheezed, "to the castle…her servants…left…in the carriage…"

His eyes widened. "You don't mean…she went to the Count Discord… *alone* ?!"

Sunset nodded. He reacted by swiping his hoof across her face.

"And you just *let* her?!"

"It wasn't…my fault."

"Whose, then? What could have possibly pulled you away from your post?"

"Another…vampire…"

He raised an eyebrow as he released his hold on her. Sunset dropped to the floor and rubbed her neck as she gasped for breath.

"Another vampire?" he repeated curiously.

Sunset raised her reddened gaze to him as her horn glowed, seething, "Don't you *ever* strike me like that again!"

"Calm down, darling, you know you deserved it."

Despite her better judgment, she dowsed her magic. She needed to tell him the news.

"A mare, a unicorn, she came out of the castle. I couldn't see inside, since it had only a few windows and they were drawn, and the stone walls were too thick to listen through. So I followed this mare and tried to get information out of her. She didn't reveal herself to me for a while…"

"So wait," Trenderhoof said, holding up a hoof. "So this *mare* was a *vampire* , and you didn't *know* it from the start?"

Sunset gulped. "Well, I…"

"Oh, Sunset, Sunset. What you make up for in magic, you lack in common *sense* ."

She scowled. "Don't criticize my nostrils! Anyway, I asked if Count

Discord was a vampire too. She didn't answer, but she did tell me that this was their territory…"

" *Their* ?"

"Yes, as in plural. Trend, I'm certain there's another coven in this area."

"Oh, goodie. Perhaps we can have a hunting party."

"Trend, she, the vampire, mentioned Lady Fluttershy. She told me to stay away from her."

He rubbed his chin in thought. "Do you suppose Count Discord is a vampire too? And that this unicorn you met works for him?"

"It's possible. She could be the leader herself…"

He laughed. "I highly doubt that."

Sunset narrowed her eyes. "Mares are just as capable of raising an army as *you* are!"

"Sure they are."

"Trend, I think they have a claim on the Lady Fluttershy, so if we so much as nibble on her neck…"

"…it could start a clan war."

As he said this, he did not appear concerned, but amused. Sunset could not believe he was taking this news so lightly.

"Perhaps we should find another rich heiress…"

"No!" Trenderhoof exclaimed. "We've already come too far in this plan to stop now! I'm not giving up everything I've worked for just because a few disgruntled vampires refuse to share!"

Her jaw dropped in disbelief. "Trend, don't you understand the consequences of going through this? These are dangerous waters we tread! Not only would a clan war create some casualties, but it'll

attract attention from the mortals. We might have to go into hiding for a while! All the riches and glory we've worked for would be wasted!"

"If a clan war is necessary, what makes you think we'll lose? After all, with your magic, the Dazzlings' charms and Bulk, our secret weapon, what coven would stand a chance against us?"

Sunset shook her head. "We don't know what we're up against. That lavender one seemed powerful. It would be unwise to…"

Trenderhoof chuckled as he slid his hooves onto her shoulders. "My naïve little nymph, you worry too much. If this other coven poses as a problem, we'll take care of it. After all, wouldn't you like to get back at that unicorn mare for outsmarting you?"

She wanted to argue, but he knew her all too well. Indeed, Sunset was afraid of what that Lavender might be capable of. Then again, she was also intrigued. Exactly how much power did she have? She had shown strategy without magic.

Want to see what I'm like with *magic?*

As it turned out, Sunset wanted to see that very much. Winning every fight was too easy. What would it be like to have a *real* challenge? Would Lavender be the proper candidate?

Sunset smiled wickedly as she returned Trenderhoof's embrace. "I imagine it would be an… *interesting* match."

"You see?" he smirked as he dipped her backward. "You'll finally get to have some fun, my pet."

She closed her eyes and awaited his lips.

"Master!"

Sunset shrieked as he dropped her. Trenderhoof glared at Sonata for rudely interrupting him.

" *What* ?!"

She tilted her head as if it were silly for him to be this angry. "You told me to tell you when the Lady Fluttershy would return and…well, she's back."

"She's back?" Sunset repeated as she stood up. "So she survived…"

"Huh?" Sonata asked, scrunching her nose.

"Has her scent… *changed* , Sonata?" Trenderhoof inquired.

The earth mare scratched her head. "Um, no? At least I think so. I wasn't paying attention."

"Has she gone paler?"

"No. Actually, she was kind of glowing. I mean her cheeks were all red."

He sighed in relief. "So she has not changed."

"No, but her maids are preparing her for bed right now."

Sunset and Trenderhoof smacked their foreheads.

"Just go to bed, Sonata," the latter grumbled.

"Okay!" she piped. "Mine or yours?"

" *Sonata* ," Trenderhoof growled through his teeth, jerking his head at Sunset.

"What'd I say?"

Sunset crossed her hooves and pointed her horn at the maid's throat.

"Oh, right!" Sonata exclaimed in realization. "Right, not in front of the mistress!"

"Get out!" Trenderhoof bellowed.

"Sheesh, I'm going! Don't keep me waiting!"

He slammed the door in her face, leaving him with a jealous Sunset.

"Care to explain?"

"You know how she is," he said dismissively. "Not quite right in the head. Too bad her transformation did nothing to improve her intelligence, much like your sense of smell."

She grunted. "You're really not helping your case here."

He put on a smile. "You know I feel nothing for her, or the others. They just make these quips to get under your skin."

"Uh-huh."

"They're jealous," he said as he replaced his hooves around her, "that *you're* my mate, and not them. Their loss. Now, where were we?"

She almost gave into him, as it was often hard to resist his violet gaze, but soon she was thinking of how much it resembled Lavender's. It led to the recollection of watching those eyes change into a deep red, their gaze so fiery, so bloodthirsty. She began wondering what her first move would've been had Sunset chosen to fight.

As the violet eyes closed and Trenderhoof started leaning in, Sunset was brought back to the present. Swiftly her desire for him withered, at least enough to make her feel uncomfortable. She gently removed his hooves, surprising him.

"You know? I'm suddenly quite tired. Why don't we skip tonight?"

He frowned slightly, but shrugged. "As you wish, dearest."

As he started to leave, Sunset decided to taunt him further and murmured, "After all, you don't want to keep Sonata waiting."

He paused and growled before slamming the door once again. Sunset let out an exasperated groan and sank onto the bed.

"Ugh, that arrogant fool! Doesn't he realize he might have just

signed our death warrants?!"

Trenderhoof was a wily stallion, but he had no prudence! If they got mixed up with the other coven, they could risk getting exposed! Vampire covens were hard enough to hide. Vampire wars were almost impossible to conceal. Count Discord was nobility, and if he was a vampire, questions would be raised if he suddenly disappeared. True, he rarely left his castle anyway, but ponies like the Ladies Starlight and Fluttershy knew him. Whatever the case, their feud wouldn't go unnoticed.

But Trenderhoof had been right about one thing. Sunset wanted a rematch with this Lavender. Their encounter had been too short. She had not had the chance to really test her wit and strength. Would it be an easy battle like all the others? Or would Lavender resist? Even when Sunset had insulted her with her grotesque insinuations, she had not backed down. Even if Sunset won, she did not believe this mare would surrender so easily. The Dazzlings had practically groveled at her hooves, even if begrudgingly.

It would also help if she knew her adversary's name. Lavender, though becoming of her physical appearance, just didn't sound intimidating enough. It was too pretty. While she indeed was pretty, why would she fight some pony named Lavender? But she didn't know enough about this pony to give her a real name.

The one thing she knew for sure: she was purple.

"Purple Pain?" she wondered aloud. "Nah, sounds too much like a bruise. Power Purple? Too lame. Just "Purple?" Too plain. It'd be something fancy. *Lady* Lavender?"

She could come up with effective spells, but coming up with names was another story.

Oh well. It didn't matter what her name was. Next time Sunset saw her, she was going to show that *she* wasn't a vampire to mess with either.

Trenderhoof wasn't too worried about Sunset's moment of defiance. She had always been a feisty one, but he didn't need her to satisfy his needs all the time. Fortunately, that's what all the others were for. As he opened the door to his room, Sonata didn't waste any time and threw her hooves about him.

"You meant *this* bed, didn't ya? Huh? Huh?"

"What took you so long?" Aria moaned as she rose from an easy chair.

"Had to keep Sunset in check," he sighed, closing the door. "And Sonata, how many times have I told you to avoid public displays of affection?"

"Sorry," Sonata giggled. "I just got excited."

"Why do you waste your time with that tramp, Master?" asked Adagio, who was sprawled on the bed. "Why do you go through such great lengths to make her believe she's your mate?"

He groaned as he sat on the bed, allowing Adagio to remove his jacket while Sonata worked on his shoes and socks.

"You know how she is: extremely envious and stubborn. She's also very powerful, and we could use that to our advantage. It's not enough to make her my mistress! She has to believe I'm hers and hers alone." He glared down at Sonata. "Though she won't for long if you keep running your mouth like that!"

"Did you let it slip *again* ?" Aria snorted as she undid his trousers. "Why are you such an idiot, Sonata?"

The blue mare scowled. " *You're* an idiot!"

"Ugh!" Adagio grunted. "You *both* are! This isn't the time for fighting."

"Speaking of fighting," Trenderhoof said as his pants slipped off, "Sunset's under the suspicion that there might be another vampire coven in town, and that at least one of them lives in Count Discord's castle. She ran into her and it appears they might have a claim on

the Lady Fluttershy."

Adagio smirked. "So we might be risking a clan war then?"

"Ooh, that'll be fun!" Sonata squealed.

"It will at least give us something to do," Aria grumbled.

"But let's not think about that right now," Adagio cooed. "Just relax, Master. We'll make sure you get a good night sleep."

Probably the only sisterly quality the Dazzlings possessed was that they didn't mind sharing. As long as they all got a piece of the fun, what did it matter? They were the only ones Trenderhoof hadn't had much trouble changing. He had first encountered them in a tavern where they were giving an enchanting performance. He knew with their already seductive looks and incredible voices, they would be valuable assets. He hadn't asked them when he had done it of course, but once they realized their newfound powers they didn't complain.

They were all in this for their own reasons. Adagio enjoyed having the power, Aria got pleasure out of torturing ponies, and Sonata… she was just in it for the fun.

The only thing they didn't like was being forced to submit to another mare, just because she was more powerful than all of them put together.

"Ugh, these eggs are too…soggy!" Sunset cried as she pushed her plate away. "I won't eat a bite!"

"You said you wanted them scrambled," Sugar Bell murmured, shaking like a leaf.

"That doesn't mean I want them *wet* !" She used her magic to fling her plate at the cook, who ducked just in time. "Come back when you've become a competent cook!"

As Sugar Bell ran out crying, Fluttershy came in hurriedly.

"What happened?"

Starlight ignored her question. "Why are you so late, Fluttershy? You were supposed to be up an hour ago!"

"Sorry," Fluttershy apologized as she took her seat. "I didn't sleep well and…"

"The morning paper, like you ordered, sir," Double Diamond said as he dropped a newspaper beside Trenderhoof.

" *Mulţumesc* ," the unicorn said as he used his magic to levitate it in front of his face.

Fluttershy couldn't help but notice Double Diamond's blush as he passed Night Glider. She waved at him with a giggle. Whatever they did last night, it must have been memorable, as well as scandalous.

Then Fluttershy caught sight of the headline on Trenderhoof's paper. She leaned across the table to get a better look. It read: *Serial Killer On the Loose* .

"Serial killer?"

Trenderhoof pulled the paper out of her view. "You should not trouble yourself with these gruesome affairs, domnişoară."

The pegasus surprised everyone by boldly reaching across and snatching up the paper.

"Fluttershy!" Starlight gasped. "Where are your manners?!"

She skimmed through the article quickly. Four stallions had been found dead in an alley by the local tavern last night, all with strange puncture wounds on their throats, so similar to those found on several other murder victims earlier this month. Like them, they had been completely drained of their blood. The police suspected a serial killer.

It wasn't the fact that a few stallions had died last night that distressed her, but the picture of the victims. They were the four thugs Discord had rescued her from all those weeks ago. And the

way they had been killed…

"How awful," she muttered.

"Yes, yes, awful," Trenderhoof said, nonchalantly snatching the paper away from her. "But these things happen, domnişoară, and you need not worry about any killers coming after you as long as you don't go out alone at night."

Fluttershy nodded slowly. She was confused beyond comprehension. There was no doubt that these stallions had been killed by a vampire. Why else would all their blood be gone and all their necks have puncture wounds? Could it be that Discord…?

No, he had sworn neither he nor the girls feasted on ponies…except when necessary. And he had gone hunting last night. Was it possible that he had decided to…change his diet? But why?

Her face filled with horror at the possibility that these stallions had died…because of *her* . Discord might have killed them out of revenge for attacking her. There was no other explanation.

But he couldn't have! He had promised he wouldn't harm them! He wouldn't lie to her! Would he?

Suddenly she wasn't very hungry.

Twilight stood before a mirror. She had never realized how… distressing it could be, staring into an empty glass. She wasn't vain, but not being able to see herself was like having no proof that she existed, like being a ghost in physical form.

She shook these feelings off, as she had not conjured this mirror to fret about her non-reflection. She had been trying so hard using Zecora's techniques to find answers. All she could see were shapes and colors, but no concrete clues as to the location of the Sirens. The zebra had suggested projecting her visions on a mirror, so that they might be clearer.

The unicorn closed her eyes and illuminated her horn. She shot a

beam at the mirror, careful to do so at an angle that wouldn't reflect back on her. She concentrated hard on her memories of the Sirens: their wild manes, their haunting voices, their horrifying but seductive appearances. Opening her eyes, she saw three silhouettes materializing in the glass. Twilight smiled hopefully, until the image faltered.

Grunting, she tried again to think of nothing but the Sirens. She had to find them. They had to pay for what they did to her parents and fiancé. This was the very reason she had become a vampire.

It was their fault she was an orphan. It was their fault she had been forced to become a bloodsucking demon. It was their fault she was now doomed to spend eternity alone, for they had killed the only stallion she had ever loved.

Her thoughts wandered to Flash and red tears fell at the memory of holding his corpse: dry, pale, lifeless. The others might find their soulmates one day, but Twilight knew no pony could replace Flash. He had been the only stallion who had supported her endeavors, treated her like an equal, and had fought to protect her to the very end. The love of her life was dead because of those monsters. There would be no other soulmate for her.

Then something else occurred to her, something she hadn't pondered on. Since she had become a vampire, she had not dreamed once. Was it because she had met Flash before and hence the dreams had not been triggered? Or…was there really some pony else out there?

She tried to bring her thoughts back to the Sirens, but other questions plagued her mind, many of them concerning the vampire she had encountered last night. Who was she? Why did she want the Lady Fluttershy?

When Twilight opened her eyes again, the mirror held the image of the fiery-maned vampire. She stomped her hoof furiously.

"No, no, *no* ! That's the *not* the vampire I want to see! Show me the *other* ones!"

She shot at the glass in fury and the image dispersed. What Twilight saw next made her gasp. She stared at it in silent astonishment.

"Hey, Twilight!" Rainbow called as she and Pinkie came in. "We were wondering if you had a book on…"

Pinkie shrieked and Rainbow crouched onto her hooves and growled.

"Intruders!"

"What?" Applejack shouted as she joined them. "Where are the…?"

She froze when she too beheld the amazing sight. Pinkie and Rainbow slowly relaxed when they realized what they were looking at.

"What's all the noise?" Rarity demanded.

When she entered, all her friends were focused on the mirror. She turned to see what the fuss was about and found herself equally stunned. She moved closer to the mirror and held her hoof up to it. An equal white hoof met hers.

She looked up and uttered, "I…I haven't seen myself in…"

She touched her face and mane, taking in all she had missed in the past century.

"I'm…I'm…"

"Gorgeous!" Pinkie squealed, her reflection popping up alongside Rarity's. "Look at me! Has my pinkishness really gone that pale?"

"Hey, I don't look half bad either!" Rainbow said as she ran her hoof through her mane. "And boy, do I make these trousers work or what?"

"How did this happen?" Applejack marveled as she watched her reflection lightly brush her straw-colored mane.

"I…I'm not sure," Twilight uttered. "I was working on a spell to help

me see the Sirens and…I guess I accidentally made it so this mirror can show… *all* vampires."

"Oh, Twilight!" Rarity squealed, throwing her hooves around the lavender unicorn. "This is truly the best spell you've ever cast! Now I don't have to rely on Spike to tell me how I look in the morning!"

When she glanced back, she noticed Applejack was frowning slightly.

"What's wrong, Applejack?"

"Yeah, why so glum?" Pinkie asked. "Aren't you excited to finally be able to see yourself again after all this time?"

"It's nothing," Applejack mumbled. "It's just…I never really thought I looked so…"

"Wait! Now I can see what I look like in bat form!"

Pinkie quickly transformed and snarled.

"Ooh, I'm a fright!" she chirped. "Cool!"

Rainbow and Rarity tried it too.

"Awesome!" Rainbow cheered. "Oh, if those misogynistic stallions could see me now!"

"Even as a beastly bat-pony, I still look fabulous," Rarity chimed.

"Rarity!" Discord's voice bellowed.

They all turned to the door in alarm. Their master was rarely ever angry, and whenever he was it was for a good reason. He stormed in, holding up a newspaper.

"Would you care to explain what…? Gah!"

He screamed and dropped the paper as he hid behind his arms.

"What is that horrifying creature over there?! How did it get in here?!"

Every pony shifted uncomfortably. Rainbow pushed Twilight forward. The unicorn glared back at her before speaking.

"Um…it's…your reflection, Master."

"My…" he stammered, lowering his arms, "what?"

"See, I was testing a spell and accidentally…well, this is probably the only mirror in the world that can hold our reflections now."

"Are you alright, Master?" Rarity asked in concern.

He stepped cautiously towards the glass, raising his paw to his face. The creature in the mirror did the same. Discord had always known his body was unusual, being made up of so many animal parts, but he had never seen his face. He had been told he had the head of a pony, but he hadn't expected this. It was so thin, so wrinkly. Unlike the mares, he actually looked his age. When he bared his teeth, he saw how pointy and menacing they appeared. And his eyes…he didn't think he needed hypnosis to stop a creature dead in their tracks.

"I'm…I'm…" he murmured. "I'm…hideous."

"Oh, *no* , Master!" Rarity insisted. "I mean…by pony standards…"

He couldn't believe it. How was it possible that Fluttershy could stand to look at such a face? Into such devilish eyes? How could she return such a frightening smile? How could she bear to kiss these rough, wrinkled lips?

Then his eyes widened in delightful realization. "I'm…hideous."

The mares looked at him in confusion as he started laughing hysterically.

"I'm *hideous* !" he cheered, snatching Pinkie and waltzing her around. "I'm hideous! I am disgustingly, monstrously hideous!"

"Yippee!" Pinkie exclaimed. "I guess?"

"I fail to see why this makes you happy," Rainbow confessed.

"Don't you realize what this means?" Discord said. "Fluttershy *loves* me!"

"Huh?"

"Look at this face! It's horrifying! No mare would dare be around me, touch me, *kiss* me even, unless…she *loved* me!"

"Now hold on there, Master," Applejack said carefully. "She may… like you, but it might be too soon for…"

She trailed off when she spotted the newspaper. She picked it up and read it over. Gasping, she turned to Rarity.

"You…you said you wouldn't do this anymore!"

"What?" Rarity asked in bewilderment. "What are you…?"

Applejack lifted the paper up to her face. Seeing the picture of the four dead stallions was enough to make her understand what the farm pony was insinuating.

"You…you think *I* …?"

"Oh, right!" Discord exclaimed, dropping Pinkie so he could glare at the white unicorn. "That's what I came here for!" He crossed his arms. "One stallion every few weeks is one thing, but *four* in the same night?!"

"You did *what* ?!" Twilight demanded, snatching the paper. After quickly reading it through, she gazed up at Rarity in disbelief. "You…you didn't!"

"I *didn't* !" Rarity insisted. "I didn't feed off any stallions!"

Discord and Applejack narrowed their eyes at her.

"Last night, anyway," she murmured guiltily.

"Seriously, Rarity?" Rainbow exclaimed. " *Again* ? Do you *want* to attract attention?"

"Feeding off ponies is wrong!" Pinkie whimpered. "How could you?"

"I was too full last night on lynx to go after any stallions!" Rarity declared. "I am not responsible for these deaths!"

"Then who is?" Applejack demanded.

"I…I don't know."

"Wait," Twilight said, thinking. "It… *could've* been that other vampire I met last night."

" *Other* vampire?" the mares asked.

"I hadn't had the chance to tell you girls, but I ran into a vampire mare last night, just before the Master came home. She was asking about Fluttershy."

"Why?" Applejack asked.

"I don't know, but I don't think she came to Zebiu alone."

"Cool, more vampires!" Pinkie applauded. "We should invite them over for a party!"

"Pinkie, they might've killed those stallions!" Rainbow reminded her. "We don't know how friendly they are!"

"Oh, right."

Discord put his claw to his mouth. "Oh no, Fluttershy! What if she saw the paper? Those stallions were the same thugs who had attacked her some time ago! I almost throttled them! What if Fluttershy thinks I did it?"

"Not to mention she might be in danger from these other vampires," Twilight said.

"Of course! I have to go explain things to her!"

"Wait, Master!" Rarity cried out, grabbing his cape. "You can't go out now! The sun is still up!"

Discord paused and sighed. "You're right. But as soon as the sun sets, I'm going to see her. I must warn you though," he said, darting his eyes at Rarity, "if it turns out that you, *any* of you are responsible for this crime, you will no longer find refuge at this castle!"

Union

End of the semester stuff is crazy. Fortunately it's almost over for me. This chapter was going to be longer, but once again, I split it, but the next chapter's already been started.

Listening to the *Dracula the Musical* soundtrack and watching *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* really gets you in the mood for these things (oddly enough that show has an Angel and Spike too).

Fluttershy paced back and forth in the darkness of her bedroom. The Infinite Iris sat on her windowsill, awaiting the creature that had given it to her. Angel was fast asleep in his bed, cuddling a half-eaten carrot. She hoped he would stay that way once Discord arrived, if he ever did.

She heard his wings before she turned around.

"You're late," she said bluntly.

Discord's initial joy drained from his face as her glare penetrated his heart.

"I-I'm sorry," he stammered. "I wasn't aware we had set a time for…"

She cut him off by holding up the morning paper.

"Explain this," she firmly demanded.

His ears drooped. "So you've heard."

She stepped towards him, far enough so he couldn't reach her but close enough so he could see the disappointment in her eyes.

"You said you didn't feed on ponies!"

"I *don't* !" Discord insisted.

"Unless when necessary. What does that mean, Discord? *This* ?" She jerked the paper for emphasis. "These are the same stallions that attacked me! They had puncture wounds on their necks, with all the blood drained from them! And you were hunting last night."

"You don't trust me?" he asked sadly.

She shook her head. "I don't know, Discord. Look me in the eye and tell me honestly. Did you kill those stallions?"

He looked at her with all the sincerity he could muster and whispered, "No."

She believed him. He had looked at her the same way when he had told her that he loved her, and he had given her little reason to doubt that.

"Then who did?" she demanded, her voice cracking.

"I don't know," he replied softly. "Well, I don't know exactly. The girls swear they didn't do it, but…"

Her eyebrow rose. "But?"

He hung his head. "There have been instances…"

She took a step closer. "Discord, what aren't you telling me?"

He raised his eyes again. "Fluttershy, you have to understand, the girls care for you almost as much as I do and know that if anything happened to you, it would destroy me, and that would upset them too."

"Even Applejack?"

"Her more than anyone else."

She blinked in confusion. "I don't…"

"A long time ago," he interrupted quickly, "not long after Rarity was changed, she felt…anger. Incredible anger towards the vampire that had bitten her. When she couldn't find him, she started taking that

anger out on…other stallions. She blamed their kind for what had happened to her, that they were all monsters seeking to…defile young mares. So…she punished them."

Fluttershy didn't need details on how she had done that, but she couldn't believe it. Rarity had always treated her so warmly. Then again, she had always recoiled from Party Favor and Double Diamond whenever they were around. The revelation that she would hate all stallions made sense.

"But I don't think she did it," Discord softly declared. "It's not like her to take on so many stallions at once. She usually does it one at a time. Pinkie would have the appetite, but even if she *had* lost control of herself again, she'd have left more of a mess behind."

"So who could've done this?"

"That's the other thing I wanted to discuss with you. Last night, just as I was coming back from my hunt, Twilight ran into another vampire."

" *Another* vampire?"

"From Twilight's description, one neither of us has seen before. She implied she wasn't alone, so we have reason to believe there's another coven in Zebiu."

Fluttershy's face paled in alarm. " *More* vampires?"

"Yes and…there's something else, I'm afraid."

"None of this is really comforting, Discord."

He winced as he said, "The vampire…mentioned you by name."

She stared at him in silence, then slowly made her way to the window seat and leaned into his chest. Discord put his arms around her, stroking her gently.

"What does this mean, Discord?" she whispered, though she was afraid of the answer.

"I means," he murmured, drinking in her scent as he nuzzled her mane, "that whatever these new vampires have planned for you, I… *we* won't let it happen."

"Promise?"

He moved away so she could look into his eyes. "I swear upon my damned soul that I will protect you, for all eternity."

He released her so he could reach into his pocket. Fluttershy frowned in bewilderment as he withdrew a small bundle wrapped in cloth.

"However, I cannot be there for you in the daylight, so I got one of these from Spike. Yes, I know about his stash. This should be a lot more stylish than the garlic."

Fluttershy unwrapped the gift to find a sun-shaped pendant similar to the one Spike had shown her yesterday.

"You know what this is?" Discord asked.

"The symbol of the sun goddess," she replied. "Spike told me. Does it really repel vampires?"

"Uh-huh," he nodded, recoiling from the necklace. "The sun hurts us, no matter what form it takes. Since we don't know where these other vampires might be lurking, it's best you wear this pendant at all times."

But instead of putting it on, Fluttershy set it on her dressing table.

"Didn't you hear me?" Discord questioned.

"Yes, but I can't wear it around *you* ."

He smiled. "Thank you for your concern, but I don't blame you for wanting to repel me."

"I don't," she whispered as she settled on the window seat. "I'm sorry I thought you had…well, you know. I should've known you weren't capable of such a horrid thing, and if you were, I don't think

you'd lie to me about it."

Her words were meant to be reassuring, but it drained all hope from Discord's heart.

"What's wrong?" she asked when she saw his frown.

He looked away in shame. "Fluttershy, I…we haven't known each other for too long and…there are still things you don't know about me."

Concerned, she slid her hoof over his paw. "Then tell me."

He caught her eye, pleading for her compassion. "It's not something you'd like. Not even my girls know about it."

"You can tell me anything."

"Even if you might not see me in the same way afterwards?"

"Discord, whatever it is, I won't care as long as you are honest with me."

Staring into her eyes was like looking at all the goodness and beauty in the world. Among those things was truth. That was all she was asking for. He had been wondering why she was always so hesitant to open up to him, but realized that she couldn't do that unless he trusted her too.

So after gathering his composure in a single breath, he began his tale.

"You remember what I said about my old master, Sombra? How before he met his mate he wasn't the most moral of vampires?"

Fluttershy nodded. "And you fed on ponies. I know. But you don't do that anymore and I believe you."

"There's more to it, Fluttershy. See, Sombra and I didn't just *feed* on ponies, we…we…"

Blood dripped from his eyes at the fear of what she would say if she

knew.

"It's okay, Discord," she said as her hoof moved to dry his tears. "I won't judge you. Whatever you did, it was a long time ago."

"You don't understand," he croaked weakly. "Sombra… *hated* ponies. He was abandoned as a foal and raised in a village of crystal ponies in Norwhinny. They ostracized him because he was so different, cast out of the village when he started dealing in dark magic. Then he got bitten and sought revenge on the crystal ponies. But he didn't have enough power. He couldn't do it on his own.

"Then he found me, a newborn draconequus whom he knew would one day grow to be a powerful creature. That's the real reason he took me in, though we did grow attached to one another over the centuries. He trained me so that I may one day take over Norwhinny, perhaps more, but until my powers were ripe enough, I had to start small. He…he taught me to…to…"

He couldn't go on, not with her innocent gaze on him. Fluttershy caressed his face, trying to assure him that he could trust her.

"What did he make you do, Discord?" she whispered.

Shutting his eyes tight, he whimpered, "He made me… *torture* my prey."

Her hoof dropped from his face and Discord knew all hope of winning her was lost. Nevertheless, he continued, for if he was going to lose her forever anyway there was no point in holding back.

"He taught me to hate ponies, to think of them as weak and insignificant. He made me believe I was better than everyone else, so whenever I fed…I made them see just that."

He buried his face in his claw and paw. "Oh, Fluttershy, if you had seen me at that time…you would've *never* come near me. The things I did to my prey, I…"

He stopped. She didn't need to know the exact details.

"Even after Hope came, I still fed on ponies. I didn't…prolong their

deaths as much, but I still fed. I didn't care who I killed."

"What made you stop?" Fluttershy asked in a dry voice.

"Rarity," Discord muttered. "When I first saw her, so limp and lifeless, she was…so young, so lovely, so innocent. She didn't deserve such a fate. I knew that even before she told me what had happened. Rarity had a life, a family, a future. One of *my* kind had taken it away from her. I…I couldn't bear the thought of inflicting such pain on another pony, so I never fed off one for my own pleasure ever again."

He opened his eyes to see her reaction. Her expression was blank, but her eyes were wide. Thinking he had frightened her into silence, he sighed sadly.

"I know you can never love me. It has nothing to do with how I look. Today I saw myself for the very first time, thanks to a spell of Twilight's."

He locked gaze with her. "I *know* I'm hideous, Fluttershy, and yet you don't mind being so close to me, touching me, kissing…"

He trailed off as his eyes wandered to her lips, but shook his head before he could lose his senses.

"But I'm still a monster. I was never a real creature. I was born like this. No, I wasn't even born. I was dead the moment I left my mother's womb. I'm…I'm an abomination, a horror that should've never existed in the first place!"

He looked out at the horizon. "Some days I think of just…walking out into the sunlight and…ending it all. I almost did a few weeks ago, but then…"

His attention returned to her. "I met you, the only creature who's ever made me feel… *real* , like I belong in this world. I've never seen the light, Fluttershy, and you brought it to me."

Then his ears fell limp on either side of his head. "But now that you know the truth about me, about what I've done in the past, I know there's no chance of us ever being together. You probably want me

as far away from you as possible."

Biting his lip, he choked, "So…just say the word and…and I'll go and…and leave you alone forever."

She wasn't touching him anymore. Staring at her distant hooves, he was certain he would never feel their softness again. He was prepared to go, to leave her in the light, but she wasn't bidding him to.

Fluttershy's heart was overwhelmed with emotion. His story had horrified her, but the fact that he had confessed it, that he had trusted her with his deepest darkest secret, brought tears to her eyes. She was sure he wasn't making it up. No one would lie about such a thing, especially to one they were trying to court, for it would scare any other mare away.

If it hadn't been clear before, it was now. He loved her. He loved her enough to tell the truth, even if it meant risking their relationship. He loved her enough to fly across the world to bring her a tiny flower. He loved her enough to leave her if she so wished.

He honestly, truly, unconditionally loved her.

"Just say the word, Fluttershy," Discord said again, closing his eyes in preparation.

But instead of sending him off, Fluttershy boldly stood up from the window seat and said, "Come in."

Discord opened his eyes in confusion. "W-What?"

She took a step back to give him more space. "I'm inviting you in, Discord."

He was still bewildered. Why wasn't she running? Why wasn't she screaming for him to leave? He had just told her of the monstrous things he had done, and yet she was inviting him in?

Despite all these questions swimming in his head, his body moved automatically through the broken barrier and before he knew it, his feet were planted firmly on Fluttershy's carpet.

They were only a step away from each other. Fluttershy was reminded of how tall he was now that he was towering over her. His eyes were burning into hers, begging the question of what now. This was their first time alone together since their first meeting. At dinner there had always been someone listening in the next room, and during his nightly visits there had always been a barrier between them.

Now here they were, alone, in a closed space, a bedroom. They could feel the large canopy bed beside them. Fluttershy quivered from the sensations vibrating within numerous parts of her body, some in certain areas that made her blush. He could do anything he liked with her. There would be no witnesses. He could drain her, change her, or do what she so desperately wanted him to do. She was afraid, yet excited, for whatever he wanted to do to her she would gladly comply, even if it meant dying in his strong arms.

But he didn't move, and the anticipation was killing her. What was he waiting for?

"W-What now?" she finally asked.

His mouth shook as he replied, "I…I want to…to kiss you."

She inhaled sharply, delighted at the idea of tasting him again.

"What's stopping you?" she exhaled.

Discord smirked slightly. "You have to give me permission first."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh, right, um…yes." She took a deep breath. "Yes, please. K-Kiss me. Do…do what you wish."

The wall between them had collapsed completely now. Nothing was keeping him from her. Yet he didn't immediately jump into it. He took his time as he crouched down to her level and raised his claw to her face. Fluttershy's breathing staggered as his cold, rough talons brushed against her fur. Her eyes closed as they weaved into her mane.

Every part of her was soft and fragile. If he moved too quickly, he feared he might break her. But he was in no rush. He wanted to

savor this moment, for if at any time she came to her senses and stopped him, he would make it last as long as possible.

Fluttershy opened her eyes again to look at him. His eyes were so sad, so pleading, so old. She felt like she understood him, that there was no more reason for doubt. True, he had made mistakes in the past, but his regret showed that he wasn't the creature he was then.

He loved her, he *wanted* her. He had gone a millennium without wanting any pony, and she needed to be wanted. Since her parents had died, she hadn't felt wanted. Aunt Starlight didn't want her. She just needed some pony to mold into her image. None of the other suitors wanted her. They just needed her money, her title. No pony had ever wanted *her* .

He did. From the moment he laid eyes on her, he had wanted her. And he hadn't known who she was, or how much money she'd had. He looked at her and didn't see wealth or station. Just *her* .

And she wanted him to want her, to cherish her, to treasure her. She was his, and while she felt it hadn't been necessary for him to ask, it just further proved how much he cared.

He gently cupped her chin and brought her lips to his. Their eyes closed in bliss and Discord moaned in satisfaction. By the laws of nature, he had the power of her, but the truth was she was the one who had the power. She knew his secrets, his fears, and by joining his lips with hers, he was surrendering all of that to her.

His mouth opened and Fluttershy gasped inwardly as something thin and wet ran along her lips. Her instincts told her to let it in and her eyes opened in alarm as a forked tongue twisted around hers. She hadn't expected it to be like a snake's, but the cold, wet sensation of it wriggling inside her mouth made her eyes close again. She pulled his face closer with both hooves, deepening the kiss. Tearing up in happiness, Discord cupped her head in his paw, firmly placed his claw on her back and crashed her against him. She was so small compared to him that when he stood, her hooves flew from the floor. But neither of them cared. They were too wrapped up in one another to notice anything.

Not even the shocked freckled face watching them through the window.

After catching the two of them in the act last night, Applejack couldn't bear the thought of leaving them alone again, so she had followed her master to Fluttershy's home. She had overheard everything, even the secrets of Discord's past. Blood still trickled down her cheeks at that realization. But the harsh truth of her master's lack of trust in her was mild compared to the pain she felt at watching him entwine with Fluttershy.

She wanted to stop this. It wasn't right. Fluttershy was too sweet, too innocent. She didn't belong in their dark world. But Applejack didn't have permission to enter, and Discord hadn't forced himself upon Fluttershy. This was *her* choice. It should've made Applejack feel better, but it didn't. Fluttershy had no idea what she was getting herself into.

Nothing was worth giving up on life. Not even love.

Applejack couldn't stand to watch anymore and took off before they could hear her sobs.

Discord's and Fluttershy's movements quickened as they both grew hungrier for each other. He clutched her mane and gown while she wrapped her hooves around his neck and pulled harder. Before they knew it, they were falling and the spell was broken when they hit the mattress.

"Discord!" Fluttershy gasped, pushing him off her.

"Oops," Discord chuckled nervously. "Guess I got a little carried away."

She sat up and glanced frantically at the covers around her. "You… we…no! It's much too soon for us to…"

"I wasn't going to!" he insisted, holding up his paw and claw. "I mean…it's not that I don't want to, but…I just can't…"

"Does this have to do with your mating laws?"

"Well, yes and no. It's just that for vampires, copulating with mortals is…unencouraged. I mean I'm technically dead. It would be… unseemly."

"But didn't…Rarity…?"

He cringed in disgust. "Some vampires are just indecent. But anyway, that wasn't what I had in mind."

Fluttershy shivered as she wrapped her hooves protectively around herself. "What then?"

He bit his lip and stammered, "I…I want to sleep with you."

She squeaked in alarm.

"Not in that way! I just want to sleep *beside* you. See…I haven't slept much these past few days and…I think…" He gulped as he rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "I think it's because… because *you're* not with me. I…I don't want you to think that I want only…" He sighed, thinking of how stupid this might sound. "I only want to fall asleep…with you in my arms. That is, if you'll let me."

"Oh, Discord," Fluttershy murmured, taking his paw and claw again. "That's so sweet."

"Really?" he asked, his wings perking up.

She nodded. "I…I care for you and…I like being with you and…yes, I'd very much like it if you held me tonight."

He smiled as she came in for another kiss. As he fiddled with her mane again, a mischievous thought occurred to him.

"Of course," he smirked, "we don't have to necessarily go to sleep right *now* ."

Fluttershy pulled away in concern. "What do you mean by that?"

He cupped her chin so she could see the sincerity in his gaze. "Do you trust me, Fluttershy?"

"Of course," she uttered with a nod.

"Just relax," he purred as he carefully laid her back on her pillows, "and if I do anything you don't like, just say so and I'll stop."

Fluttershy gasped sharply as she felt his claw run up her leg and stop at the edge of her gown. He was teasing her, but she knew he wouldn't go further than that. Until then, she was looking forward to everything else he had planned.

"Yes, Discord," she whispered as she brought him in for another kiss. "Keep going."

I am REALLY not good with the hot and heavy stuff.

Encounters

SUMMER!

Applejack was still crying by the time she reached the forest. All this time, Discord, whom she had trusted with her life, had been a cold-blooded killer and had lied about it. He had mentioned hunting ponies before, but hunting for food and hunting for pleasure were two different things. And he had said he wouldn't take advantage of Fluttershy. While he hadn't used any force, in a way, he *had* taken advantage. Taken advantage of her weak, sensitive heart. Didn't he know how fragile she was? If he loved her, why was he promising her death?

It wasn't right, even if Fluttershy was willing.

Two bodies snapped her out of her thoughts and she, Rainbow Dash and Pinkie Pie, all in their bat forms, cried out as they bounced off each other.

"Whoa, AJ, what the heck?" Rainbow shouted as she massaged her head.

"Sorry, I didn't see y'all," Applejack groaned.

"What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"And are you crying?" Pinkie inquired.

"No!" Applejack snapped, trying her best to wipe away the red tears. "Wind's stainin' my eyes. Why are *y'all* out here?"

"We're going down to the tavern for some drinks," Rainbow explained.

"Wanna come?" Pinkie offered. "You look like you could use the morale booster."

"Tavern?" Applejack questioned. "Drinks? Don't tell me *y'all* were the ones who drained those four stallions last…"

"Oh, no, no, no, no!" Rainbow exclaimed, waving her hooves. "We're talking about *drinks* , drinks."

"Ale, beer, whisky, wine," Pinkie listed. "You know. Alcohol!"

Applejack raised her eyebrow skeptically. "Why in the world would you go out and drink mortal mush like that?"

"Clears the mind right up," Rainbow shrugged. "The best part is that we won't get drunk! Guess it doesn't affect vampires like it does mortals."

Applejack crossed her hooves. "You do realize all that's gonna do is make ya sick and puke, right?"

"And if we were *mortals* and drinking alcohol?"

The orange mare glanced between the two of them and sighed. "Why the heck not?"

She flew with them into town and they landed in front of the noisy pub, changing back into ponies. Applejack flinched as a crash came from inside.

"I don't know about this."

"Chill out, AJ," Rainbow said, throwing her foreleg around her friend's neck. "You'll be fine as long as you stick with me.

When she pushed open the doors, she was met with a collective, "Rainbow Dash!"

"Hey, boys!" the pegasus greeted, giving some of the drunkards hoof bumps. "Lookin' good, Thunder Lane! Rolly Polly, have you lost weight?"

The stallion she was talking to, a noticeably large earth pony, chuckled giddily. "You noticed!"

"Pinkie Pie!" shouted the patrons when said mare entered.

"Make way, Zebiu!" Pinkie chimed. "The fun has arrived!"

The crowd cheered, some ponies passing out from the excitement.

"Guessin' ya come here a lot?" Applejack asked, glancing around at her friends' apparent fan club.

"Yeah, we're really popular with these guys," Rainbow boasted, "on account that we *always* win the drinking games here."

Rolly Polly smirked when he noticed Applejack. "I see you brought another pretty friend, Dashie."

The orange mare shrunk back uncomfortably, but Rainbow didn't seem to notice his suggestive tone.

"Oh yeah, this is Applejack," she said.

"Tell me, Applejack," Rolly Polly sneered, holding up his foaming tankard. "You think you can handle *this* ?"

"You bet she can!" Pinkie piped, locking her foreleg in Applejack's. "Come on, AJ! Bar's up there!"

She followed the pink pony, for she wanted to get as far away from Rolly Polly as possible.

"Come and see me once you've ordered, alright, sweetheart?"

Applejack stiffened as she felt a slap on her backside. The vulgar stallion was laughing jollily behind her. Narrowing her eyes, she whipped around, grabbed the drunk by the shirt with both hooves and pressed his back against the table. He cried out in alarm, as did many other patrons.

"Touch me like that again," she growled dangerously, "and mark my words, I will not hesitate to rip yerr throat out!" She allowed her eyes to change red to intimidate him further. "That clear?"

Rolly Polly gulped. "Yes, ma'am."

"Good."

She thrust him onto the table. When she looked up, all eyes were on her.

"What are *y'all* lookin' at?!"

The ponies turned away and tried to look preoccupied.

"Hehe, uh…she's a little tense tonight!" Rainbow forcefully chuckled, throwing her hoof around Applejack. "She'll be fine after a few drinks!"

"Move along!" Pinkie shouted, pushing the crowd away. "Nothing to see here, ponies!"

Rainbow pulled Applejack aside and harshly whispered, "Word of advice: roughhousing? *Not* a good idea. Don't want Pony Joe throwing ya out."

"Pony Joe?" Applejack asked.

"Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie!" the bartender cried.

"Pony Joe, my main stallion!" Rainbow greeted, slapping her hoof on the counter. "Three pints of ale, for me and my gals here!"

"Sure she can handle it?" Pony Joe inquired, glancing at Applejack.

The orange mare snorted in frustration. " *Yes* ."

"Coming right up. You ladies can take that booth over there."

"Thanks!" Rainbow saluted.

The three vampires settled in the back corner and waited for their drinks.

"Why don't we make this more interesting?" Rainbow smirked, leaning her elbows on the table. "First one to lose their drinks pays for all of 'em."

"Come again?" Applejack said, raising an eyebrow.

"Since we can't get drunk," Pinkie explained, "we judge our contests by who's able to keep it all in. I'm the reigning champion!"

"Hey, I beat you once!" Rainbow protested.

"Once out of thirty! I still say mine was drugged that time, so it doesn't count!" She smiled at Applejack. "I'll sip slowly, since this is your first time."

"Why does every pony think I can't handle alcohol?" Applejack demanded.

" *Can* you?" Rainbow teased. "I mean did you ever drink before you were bitten?"

"As a matter of fact, yes! I grew up on an apple farm, remember? Every year we made a batch of hard cider to sell. I was twenty, I was old enough!"

"Oh it has nothing to do with how old you were," the pegasus smirked, crossing her hooves. "I was popular in taverns even *before* I met Discord."

The orange mare's eyes widened. "Weren't ya seventeen?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

"I didn't really drink much as a mortal," Pinkie said, "but on the farm we had a lot of rock juice, and that was *crazy* stuff!"

Applejack glanced across the table at Rainbow. "Rock juice?"

"Don't question it," the pegasus mouthed.

"Three pints of ale!"

The vampires were surprised to see a filly carrying their tankards. She was an orange pegasus in raggedy clothing that appeared to be inside out, and when she made eye contact with Rainbow Dash, her tray shook in her hoof.

"Now what's a nice filly like you doing in a place like this?" Rainbow

asked in concern.

"Gee, Dashie!" Pinkie snorted. "That's gotta be the oldest line in the book!"

The filly was still shivering as she set the tray down. "H-H-Here. Enjoy!"

She bolted away, leaving the vampires confused.

"Now that's just sad," Rainbow uttered.

"I know what ya mean," Applejack nodded. "It ain't right for a sweet little filly like that to be workin' in this dump. She shouldn't even be here in the first place."

"Well," the pegasus chimed, lifting her mug. "Bottoms up! Hope you brought your purse, AJ!"

Pinkie was more enthusiastic to clink her tankard with Rainbow's than Applejack was. They simultaneously chugged the ale down their throats. Applejack coughed as she slammed her mug down.

"This is just *disgusting* !"

"Believe me," Rainbow said, wiping her mouth. "It didn't taste much better when I was mortal." She called to the bartender, "Another round for us, Joe!"

After three more rounds, Applejack was starting to feel queasy. The wretched liquid was bubbling up her throat, but she swallowed hard to keep it contained. With the awful night she was having, she wanted to at least feel good about winning this stupid game. As unpleasant as it was, however, the ale was numbing her emotions, making her momentarily forget all the dreadfulness of the evening.

"You ladies drink a lot," the pegasus filly commented as she served them their fifth round. "And yet you don't seem the least bit dizzy."

"Maybe not on the outside," Applejack mumbled.

"So tell me, kid," Rainbow said, leaning down to the filly, "what are

ya doing here?"

The foal was a lot less shy now, and seemed to be taking a liking to Rainbow Dash. She responded with a shrug.

"Times are tough, it's cold out, I need to eat, and not freeze to death."

"I get it," Rainbow nodded. "I had to take on a lot of crummy jobs in my day too. Few ponies hire Romanes, you know?"

The filly's eyes widened. "You're Romane too?"

"Born and raised," Rainbow declared, proudly sticking out her wings. "Don't be ashamed of who you are, kid. Work hard, keep a stiff upper lip and someday, you'll end up in a big castle like me!"

"Castle?!" the young one exclaimed in amazement.

"Yup. I work up the hill for the Count Discord. You know, if you ever need a job, I'm sure he'd…"

"Rainbow!" Applejack hissed. "Ya crazy? We can't have a foal in the…"

"It's okay," the filly sighed. "You don't have to pity me. I'm used to all this." She glanced nervously up at them. "Besides, I…I don't know what it is, but there's something about you that…"

She stopped abruptly as the front door swung open and three beautiful mares walked in. The filly squeaked and hid under the table.

"It's them!"

"It's who?" Pinkie asked.

"The singing mares! They walked out with those stallions yesterday! The ones that were in the morning paper! Of course I couldn't read it, but I saw the picture of them dead!"

"Hold on," Rainbow said, peering down at her. "You mean the four

stallions who were murdered in an alley?"

The filly nodded with a whimper. Applejack squinted at the three maidens who were spreading apart into the crowd. They moved gracefully, subtly brushing past unsuspecting stallions, who were immediately dumbstruck the minute they touched them. It was only now that Applejack realized the mares had been singing, so softly that she hadn't heard them over the tavern hubbub. Even now, the noise was quieting down as attention shifted to the singing mares.

Pinkie sniffed the air and gasped. "Girls! They're…they're our kind!"

"Our kind?" the filly whispered from under the table.

"Shush," Applejack hissed, putting her hoof to Pinkie's mouth. "Keep quiet and maybe they won't notice us."

"Why?" Rainbow frowned. "I mean it's not like they'll hurt us."

"Rainbow, think. Three vamp— *mares* ? Singin' like *sirens* ?"

The pegasus' eyes widened as she glanced back at the strange maidens. "You don't think they're the same ones Twilight…?"

"They might be. But if we confront 'em now it's gonna start a tussle, maybe even a clan war. We can't risk that here."

"Too late for that," said Pinkie. "The poofy-haired one's already smelled us."

Sure enough, the yellow mare with the poofy orange mane was staring right at the trio. Beneath the table, the filly scrambled to conceal herself behind Rainbow's legs. The yellow mare held up her hoof and her companions immediately stopped singing. She gestured for them to follow her as she made her way to the booth in the corner.

"What do we do, what do we do?" Pinkie squealed, kicking her legs anxiously.

"Just play it cool," Applejack whispered through her teeth.

"Don't let them eat me!" the filly squeaked.

"Don't worry, kid," Rainbow said, patting her on the head. "We'll keep you safe, but you're too exposed behind my legs there."

"Quick, hide under my skirt!" Pinkie whispered.

The filly scampered over to Pinkie and was surprised to see that she fit under her dress. The odd mare sensed her confusion and winked.

"It's bigger on the inside."

By now the Sirens were a foot away from them. The yellow one stuck out her forelegs to stop the others. Applejack could sense the caution in her movements and Rainbow was feeling territorial as she scooched closer to Pinkie, as if that would hide the filly better. Pinkie just put on a wide grin as if she wasn't doing anything suspicious.

"Well, what do we have here?" the yellow mare said, giving a small but hesitant smile. "We didn't expect this tavern to be taken."

"I reckon y'all aren't from around here?" Applejack asked, folding her hooves and leaning back against the booth.

"We're just passing through. Thought we'd have a few drinks." She glanced down disapprovingly at their pile of empty tankards. "Though it seems…not the same kind *you* had in mind."

"Oh, no, no, no!" Rainbow laughed nervously. "These aren't…we were just…"

Pinkie was quicker to defend. "We just do it for the extra kick! Ponies taste *much* better after a few pints of ale! It's just like drenching asparagus in wine!"

The yellow mare glanced at her comrades before smirking and saying, "Mind if we join you?"

"Uh…" Rainbow and Applejack uttered.

"Sure, pull up a chair!" Pinkie piped. "Or three, in your case!"

"Pinkie!" Applejack hissed.

"Just play along," she whispered back.

The Sirens took their seats out from under three drunken stallions, paying no heed to their complaints, and settled themselves around the table.

"So," Pinkie chimed. "I'm Pinkie Pie! These are my friends, Applejack and Rainbow Dash!" She leaned forward and murmured. "Don't let Dashie's clothes fool you! She's a mare!"

"Adagio Dazzle," the yellow one said before gesturing to the fuchsia mare and then the blue. "My sisters, Aria Blaze and Sonata Dusk."

Pinkie cocked her head. "If you're sisters, how come you all have different last names?"

"They're our middle names," Aria grunted. "Our last name is Dazzling."

Pinkie turned to Adagio. "So your name is Adagio Dazzle Dazzling?"

Adagio scowled at her.

"You'll have to excuse Pinkie," Rainbow said, hastily throwing her hoof in front of her friend. "She's spent too much time in the," she leaned forward to whisper, "A-S-Y-L-U-M."

"Oh, the *Asseeloom* !" Sonata squealed excitedly. "I went there too!"

"Really?!" Pinkie cried, letting out an equally excited squeal. "Did they put you in a pillow room?"

"Uh-huh! And a really tight blanket with arms! Did they ask *you* a lot of really stupid questions?"

"What color is the sky?"

"Who was the first King of Tramplevania?"

"What's two plus two?"

Sonata frowned. "I never *did* get that one right."

"It was the one about the current King of Prance that got me."

"Prance *has* no king," Aria mumbled. "It was a trick question."

"Really?" Sonata said, tapping her chin. "Hard to keep up with all the revolutions."

"I think they have a chicken in charge now," said Pinkie.

"Look at this, Sonata," Aria sneered. "You've finally found a pony dumber than you."

Pinkie's ears drooped as Adagio and Aria snickered. Rainbow and Applejack each put a hoof on their friend's back.

"Lay off her, okay!" Rainbow exclaimed, darting her eyes at them.

"Oh come now, we were only joking," Adagio said sweetly. "We say these things about Sonata all the time and she doesn't mind. Right, little sister?"

"Yeah," Sonata scoffed. "Funny."

Her eyes were downcast as she said this. Pinkie knew smiles and could see that this one wasn't genuine.

"So do you three have a permanent residence here?" Adagio inquired. "Or are you traveling like us?"

"We live here," Applejack said bluntly, her eyes still narrowed. "I reckon you three were the ones who caused those headlines this mornin'?"

"Oh, you mean those gypsy bums?"

Rainbow choked on her ale upon hearing that derogatory term.

"Aw, man," Aria sighed dreamily. "What a feast."

"I almost let the short one live," Sonata snickered. "He was kinda cute, but way too yummy for me to stop."

"Yes, that certainly was a meal to remember," Adagio said proudly.

"Well," Applejack snorted, "your little 'meal to remember' was a little *too* conspicuous. Suppose the superstitious folk around here figured it was one of our kind that did it. Who do ya think they're gonna suspect?"

"We didn't mean to cause any disruption, but we vampires need to eat."

Pinkie could feel the filly shivering under her skirt.

"Yes, but if y'all are gonna hunt here," Applejack said firmly, "y'all are gonna have to be more careful about it. This has been our master's territory for centuries."

"And who is your master?" Adagio inquired.

Pinkie opened her mouth but Rainbow's hoof stopped her.

"I see. He's too well known and you don't want his reputation ruined. The same goes for *our* master. So how many of you are there? One of our friends bumped into one of *your* friends the other night."

"Twilight?" Rainbow said.

Applejack sent her a glare and the pegasus smacked her forehead for letting it slip.

"No, the *other* night," Adagio said in annoyance. "Not *twi* light."

Rainbow and Applejack sighed in relief.

"Uh, we have about two others," Pinkie responded, "not including our master."

"So that makes six," Adagio nodded. "Quite a number."

"You kidding?" Sonata scoffed. "We have like…"

Adagio slapped her hoof over her sister's mouth. "Five. Just the one other and our master."

Aria was scouring the pub. "You don't have any claims on these mortals, do you?"

"Didn't y'all have enough last night?" Applejack grumbled as she sipped her mug.

"What can we say?" Adagio shrugged. "We can't get enough."

"You should really take it easy on the blood drinking," Pinkie warned. "It's no good on your girlish figures."

"Not to mention this is *our* territory," Applejack said, huffily slamming her tankard down on the table. "And didn't I just say this'll draw attention to us?"

"Fine, fine," Adagio said, waving her hoof. "We'll cut back. The last thing we'd want is to start a feud. We're all friends here, right?"

The two groups stared at each other in silence, forcing smiles and trying not to glare.

The door opened and stallions once again whistled in awe. The vampires turned to see Rarity walk in. She froze when she noticed them and became especially shaky when she caught Applejack's gaze.

"'Scuse me," the orange mare said as she began making her way across the room.

"Ooh, hoo, hoo!" Sonata squealed. "Into the *fairer* sex, huh? Well, they are filled with sugar and spice and everything nice!"

Pinkie scoffed. "She's not a…"

Rainbow kicked her in the hoof, accidentally hitting Scootaloo who let out a groan. Fortunately, the tavern was so noisy the Dazzlings didn't notice.

"Yup!" Rainbow said quickly. "Can't handle the heavy stuff! If you know what I…"

She paused and put her hoof to her mouth as she puffed her

cheeks. She grabbed her tankard and let the contents of her stomach spill into it. The Dazzlings recoiled in disgust.

"Game over!" Pinkie cheered as she happily finished her last mug. "Let's see: five rounds, three drinks per round, five bits per drink, that all adds up to…"

The illness in her own stomach cut her off. The Dazzlings stood and slowly backed away.

"We'll just," Adagio stammered, "get some *real* drinks."

Hearing this, Applejack turned back and figured she should stop them, until that Rolly Polly called out:

"Leaving so soon, sweetheart? The ale too much for you?"

She glared at the round stallion. When Aria past her, Applejack pointed at him and whispered:

"Eat that one."

Though it was against her better judgement, at least that pig wouldn't be missed.

While the Dazzlings were distracted, Rainbow crouched under the table.

"It's okay," she whispered. "If you come out now, you can slip out the back."

The filly nervously peered out from under Pinkie's skirt. "Y-You're… v-v-vampires?"

Rainbow bit her lip. "You heard all that, huh?"

She nodded. "You're…you're not gonna…?"

"Heck, no! We don't eat ponies. Just animal blood."

"But…you said to those singing vampires…"

"Well, we didn't want them thinking we were wimps!"

"They're meanies!" Pinkie grunted. "Except for maybe the blue one. I like her."

"But you don't have to worry about us. We won't hurt ya, kid. Hey, what's your name, anyway?"

The filly gulped. "S-Scootaloo."

"Well, it was nice meeting ya, Scoots. And hey, if those Dazzlings ever give you any trouble, just come up to our castle in the woods. It's big and dark and spooky. Ya can't miss it."

Her instincts were telling her that these ponies were just as bad news at the Dazzlings, but there was something comforting in Rainbow Dash's words, like she was a pony to be trusted. Scootaloo smiled brightly.

"Thanks, Domnişoară."

"Please. Just Rainbow Dash is fine."

"Okay, Rainbow Dash!" Scootaloo squealed as she slunk out from under the table.

"You be careful now!" Rainbow called softly.

"I will!"

Meanwhile, Rarity was already out of the tavern before Applejack reached the door, but it wasn't hard to catch up with her.

"Ya mean to tell me what yerr doin' out here so late?" the earth pony demanded. "Ya weren't lookin' for another stallion to chew on, were ya?"

"For your information," the unicorn huffed, "I'm looking to clear my name! *I* did not drink those stallions last night! I'm here to find out who did."

"We already found out. Those three mares we were talkin' to? They're vampires."

Rarity glanced back at the pub. "They're everywhere lately, aren't they?"

"And get this. When they walked in, they were *singin* '."

She gasped. "Are you saying that…?"

Applejack nodded. "They *have* to be the ones Twilight's after. Those stallions sure were mesmerized. I mean they weren't just ogglin', they were *silent* !"

"What should we do?"

"Tell Twilight, of course. Only she'd know for sure."

"Hey, wait," Rarity said, coming to a stop so she could glare accusingly at her friend. "So *that's* what you meant when you told that mare to 'eat that one!'"

"He kept tryin' to court me!" Applejack insisted.

The unicorn crossed her hooves. "Right. And *what* was it you said to me the other night? Something along the lines of…having no right to feed on stallions just because they are a vile breed?!"

"I wasn't feedin' on him!"

"Oh no. You just set *another* vampire on him. That makes it alright then, hmm?"

Applejack gritted her teeth. "It's not the same…"

"It never is for you, is it? Don't forget, Applejack. We *both* suffered under similar circumstances. Why can't you just admit that you're just as repulsed by males as I am?"

"Not *all* males," the earth pony muttered.

"Oh, really? Then what's with all this unpleasantness you've been expressing towards the Master lately?"

"What do ya mean?"

"Oh, please! Ever since he met Fluttershy, you've been treating him like a notorious villain!"

"I just don't like what he's doin' with Fluttershy, that's all."

"What? What don't you like? He hasn't done a *thing* to harm her! He hasn't even laid a talon on her without her permission! The Master *saved* you, Applejack! I can't believe you'd think he of all creatures would do a thing like that to Fluttershy! He *loves* her!"

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "If he *really* loved her, he wouldn't be doin' this! Doesn't he know what this'll do to her? She'll become so desperate for him that she'll give up everything to be with him! She'll give up her *life* , Rarity! She'll become like us!"

"But she'll be *happy* , because she'll be with the one she loves!"

The earth mare's gaze fell to the ground as she muttered, "Sometimes that isn't enough."

"Why wouldn't it be? It's not like she'll be a mate-less, male-hating blood drinker like us."

Applejack rolled her eyes. "Not *all* males are pigs, Rarity!"

"Again with the hypocrisy! You know I'm right! Even if I'm not, at least I know my mind! You keep telling yourself that our situations are different, but they are *not* ! Tenderheart ruined you just as much as he did me! And you hate all of male-kind because of it!"

Applejack sighed. "You won't always think this way, Rarity. Someday, you're gonna meet a stallion who's gonna be yerr mate and everything will change."

"Humph!" Rarity grunted. "Show me *one* decent, courteous, non-vulgar stallion who sees more than just my pretty face and fine figure, and maybe that will happen! But given the odds, I doubt it will ever…"

She trailed off as a grand white carriage approached them. Applejack and Rarity stepped out of the way to let it pass.

"Stop for a moment, boys!" a voice called from within.

The coach pulled to a stop and the door opened. The only passenger was a tall, stout, well-dressed white unicorn with a wavy blue mane and mustache. He used his magic to lift a monocle to his eye.

"You ladies are out rather late, aren't you?"

His voice was suave, but his tone had a hint of concern. Rarity was looking at him curiously, while Applejack just wanted him to go away so they could continue their conversation.

"We can manage just fine on our own, thank you," she said, gruffly trying to walk away.

"You certain you ladies don't need a lift?" the stallion asked.

"No, thank—YA!"

Rarity pulled Applejack to her side and flashed the stallion a sweet smile. "Oh, we wouldn't want to trouble you, domnule."

"No trouble at all," the stallion grinned. "I was just on my way home from a dinner party. Where are you headed?"

"None of yerr…" Applejack started to say.

"Count Discord's castle!" Rarity exclaimed cheerily.

The stallion's monocle popped off his eye. "Count Discord? You know him?"

"Oh, yes. We work for him."

"Ah!" he nodded. "That explains it."

Applejack narrowed her eyes. "What's *that* supposed to mean?"

"Oh, not to say you ladies look like servants! Quite the contrary. It's just that few ponies actually *know* Count Discord. But what are you two maids doing out here alone at night?"

"Oh, just taking a stroll," Rarity chuckled, batting her eyelashes. "But we lost track of time. Would you be so kind as to take us home the rest of the way? We'd hate to run into any trouble."

"Of course." He called to his servants pulling the carriage, "We'll make a stop at Count Discord's castle, alright, chaps?"

The two servants nodded and the unicorn stallion held out his hoof for Rarity. Before taking it, she turned to Applejack and whispered:

"I'll show you that I'm right."

Applejack wasn't too keen on taking a lift from a stranger, but she was concerned for the stallion's safety. So she followed in after Rarity, ignoring the bloke's hoof, and sat beside her. The stallion shut the door and the carriage started up again. Rarity grinned graciously at the stranger.

"It is so very kind of you to be doing this, Domnule…"

The stallion bowed his head. "Lord Fancy Pants, at your service, domnişoare."

Rarity gasped. "Lord Fancy Pants! I've heard of you. You live not too far from us!"

"Yes, on the other edge of the wood. And you, ladies?"

"Oh! How rude of me. I am Rarity, and this is Applejack."

"Howdy," Applejack grumbled, cautiously watching her friend out of the corner of her eye.

She seemed oddly cheery, considering she was around a stallion she had never met before. Upon closer inspection, Applejack could tell the corners of Rarity's mouth were struggling to stay pointed.

Meanwhile, Rarity was eyeing the stallion carefully, searching for signs of profanity. He was of high station. She didn't need to hear his title to know that, for his suit was fine. Prench, she believed. He had incredible fashion sense. His blue eyes were on her face and not anywhere else. Perhaps that was a good sign. And as much as

she hated to admit it, he was handsome. Even though he looked to be about thirty-five, there was a charming maturity in him. His face, his posture, his demeanor. But Rarity could not get too caught up in his looks, as she of all ponies knew how deceiving they could be.

Then his eyes wandered downward, and Rarity impulsively covered the space between her legs.

"That is an exquisite gown," he complimented. "Where did you get it?"

She looked down at her ensemble. It was a white evening dress with a ruffled skirt and sleeves, one that was elegant but not too flashy.

"Oh," she said, suddenly shy. "I, um, made it myself."

"No kidding!" he exclaimed in awe. "Are you a seamstress?"

"Err, not quite. I just make my own clothes. Oh, and my friends'. And the Count's, sometimes."

"Such fine workmanship. Is that satin?"

She looked up at him in surprise. "Y-Yes, actually."

"I like it," he nodded approvingly. "Very reminiscent of the Germane fashion."

"Oh, yes!" she said excitedly. "Empress Sissi's gowns really inspired me!"

"Oh, you've been to Germaneigh?"

"Yes, Count Discord and I went there thirty yea— *days* ago!"

"I take it you also saw the Neuschwanstein castle."

"Well, they had barely started construction when we…"

He raised an eyebrow. "What are you talking about? It's been open to the public for almost a decade now."

Rarity gulped. "I mean…such an inspiring, romantic image brought

out of a fairy tale just…can never be truly finished, you know?"

She hoped another sweet smile would make him dismiss the subject. Fancy Pants shrugged.

"I suppose. I've yet to see it myself, but I've heard it's a sight to behold."

"Oh, it is! A masterful piece of construction. You should really visit."

"So what is Count Discord's castle like? If you don't mind me asking?"

"Oh!" Rarity huffed. "That bloke *cannot* decorate to save his life! Everything has to be so dark and dreary! Honestly, if I hadn't come along there'd be no color at all in that place!"

"So you're his dressmaker *and* his interior decorator? You must be quite the busy mare."

"Oh, you can't imagine! You know how he locks himself inside all day? That's when he gets so *moody* ! And I have to get a handkerchief for him to blow his nose in! Honestly, sometimes I feel like his mother!"

Fancy Pants chuckled. "And at your age, too!"

Rarity dropped her smile as she rubbed the back of her neck. "Oh, I'm, uh…not *that* young."

"Could've fooled me. You have a youthful face."

Her grin returned, though it was small and brief.

"I've always wondered what went on in that castle," Fancy Pants mused. "I hear the Lady Fluttershy is a frequent guest."

"Yes, charming girl," Rarity said.

"Tell me," he said, leaning forward slightly. "Do you know if Count Discord intends to marry her?"

"Oh, most definitely! He is quite taken with her, but he's not going to rush into anything, of course."

"Of course. I always believed a mare and stallion should be well acquainted with each other before marriage. Otherwise, why get married at all if it's not with some pony you at least respect?"

Rarity blinked in bewilderment. "Y-Yes. Of…of course."

Applejack had been watching the two of them in wonder. She had never seen Rarity speak so animatedly. With a stallion, nonetheless. And now, she could see the amazement in the unicorn's gaze. Applejack had heard the words too, and knew how they must've struck her friend.

"Are you married, domnişoară?" Fancy Pants asked.

"Hmm?" Rarity uttered. She shook herself back to the present. "Oh no, no! No, I'm not married."

He smiled kindly. "Well, with your beauty, talents and charming personality, you're sure to win a husband in no time."

She hung her head. "I don't think the married life is for me. I'm already married to my…work."

"That's a shame. You'd certainly make any stallion happy."

"I'm sure I would," she murmured disgruntledly.

The carriage stopped and Fancy Pants looked out at Discord's castle. "Goodness, what an estate!"

"Hmm?" Rarity grunted, looking up. "Are we here already?"

"'Bout time," Applejack muttered, pushing open the door to get out. "Thanks for the ride."

"It was my pleasure," Fancy Pants said.

"Wait," Rarity said, turning to him. "You…you actually took us home."

He cocked his head at her. "Yes, I said I would, didn't I?"

"Yes, but…you didn't…I mean…you were alone with us all that time. You could've…you could've done *anything* and no pony would've witnessed, but…you didn't."

His eyes widened. "Did you think…? Oh, goodness!" He smacked his forehead. "Did I come off as too forward? I didn't mean to insinuate…I was trying to be polite…"

"No, no, no! You were a perfect gentlecolt! It's just…" She looked down. "Most stallions would…do something like…"

He understood and lightly touched her hoof. She looked up in surprise, but didn't pull away.

"I think any stallion who would take advantage of such a fine mare like yourself," he said softly, "is not worthy of your time."

She stared at him, into his deep blue eyes, so similar to her own. Somehow she believed him. He really could've done anything to her all this time. Not that he would've gone far with her vampire powers, but he still could've tried. He could've even invited her back to his manor for the evening, but it seems he was really just dropping her off. There was also something strange in the way he spoke to her. In society's eyes, she was a mere servant. He was a lord. And yet, they had just conversed so casually, like equals, the way she and Discord talked.

But this was different. Discord was like a brother to her. Fancy Pants had complimented on not just her beauty, but her fashion, her work, her personality. In the few minutes they had talked, he was treating her like a close friend, not as a potential mistress.

It had been so long since she had met a stallion like this.

"Ow!" Rarity cried out suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Fancy Pants asked in concern.

"S-Sorry," she stammered. "E-Electric shock." She attempted to stand. "I-I should get going."

"Here, let me lend you a hoof."

She paused and gazed down at his hoof as he took hers again. Normally, she would pull away, but she felt compelled to let him guide her. His hoof didn't leave hers until she was safely on the ground.

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "I nearly forgot! I'm having a dinner party this Saturday and I was so hoping Count Discord could attend. I've been trying to have him over for years, but you can guess what the answer's always been. I figured since the Lady Fluttershy is attending, he might change his mind. Do you suppose…?"

Applejack crossed her hooves. "Sorry, but the Count Discord is not one for…"

"You ladies can come too, if you'd like."

Rarity's jaw dropped. "Us? Mere servants?"

He winked. "Bring one of those dresses and no pony will tell."

"Look," Applejack grunted. "I know you're tryin' to be nice and all, but…"

"I'll be there!" Rarity piped. She cleared her throat. "I mean… *we'll* be there. Me and Count Discord."

The earth pony looked at her in shock. "What are ya doin'?"

"Splendid!" Fancy Pants cheered. "I'll save a place for you. Oh, Saturday, seven o'clock at my estate."

"Alright!" Rarity grinned.

"Uh, Rarity?" Applejack whispered. "Seven is when the sun…"

"We'll be there!"

Applejack smacked herself in the forehead. It was like she wasn't even there.

"I will see you, then," Fancy Pants said, closing the door. "Home, boys."

As the carriage pulled away, Rarity called out, " *Mulţumesc* !"

" *Cu plăcere* !" Fancy Pants shouted back.

Rarity continued waving, even when the coach was lost in the darkness of the forest.

"What the hay was *that* ?!" Applejack demanded. "The Master can't go to a dinner party! What if he loses track of time and his disguise drops in front of every pony?! Did I mention he also has to *eat* in front of every pony?! *Real food* which he can't digest?! Which *you* can't digest! And you're goin' too! This is just great! What were ya thinkin', Rarity?! Do ya have any idea what you've just gotten yourself in…?"

She trailed off when she realized the unicorn wasn't listening to her, but still waving in the direction Fancy Pants' coach had disappeared. A dreamy look occupied her face.

"Uh, you alright, Rarity?" Applejack waved her hoof in her friend's unblinking face. "Rarity? Hello? Did ya hear what I said?"

Alas, she was unresponsive. Suddenly, after a glance at Rarity's silk dress, Applejack got an idea.

"Say, is that a stain on yerr skirt?"

"Stain?!" Rarity exclaimed, snapping out of her trance and frantically examining her skirt. "Where?! Where is it?! I can't have this fabric stained! It's too delicate!"

"There's no stain on yerr skirt," Applejack said bluntly.

Rarity looked up at her in appalment. "Darkness, Applejack! What gives you the right to frighten me like that?!"

"I had to get ya to listen *somehow* !" The earth mare crossed her hooves. "Now, I'll ask again. *Slowly* . What. Made. Ya. Think. Acceptin'. That. Invitation. For. The. Master. Was a good idea?!"

The unicorn glanced between her friend and the carriage path as she finally understood what she had just done. "Oh dear. I just created complications, didn't I?"

" *Yes* !" Applejack snorted impatiently. "Why'd ya go and do a thing like that?!"

"I don't know! I got distracted!"

"By *what* ?!"

" *Him* , okay?! I couldn't help it! His eyes, his manners, the way he held my hoof—gently, barely touching, no expectations—and then when he invited me I just couldn't turn him down…"

"He invited *the Master too* ! What's gotten into ya, Rarity? I've never seen ya so…befuddled."

Rarity glanced down at the hoof Fancy Pants had touched, then out to where she had last seen him, and then back to her hoof. In her head, she replayed the moment she felt the spark between their hooves. His cologne still lingered in her nostrils. Juniper Phoenix, an expensive and elegant scent. There had been something else too. It was like smelling her old dress shop: the starch, the fresh cloth, even the disgusting mothballs. All her favorite, familiar scents in one.

It had taken its time—fifteen minutes, she figured—but it had happened. She was surprised by how willing she was to accept it, as if it were inevitable. Was this what Discord had felt upon meeting Fluttershy? This mix of confusion and acceptance?

"Rarity?" Applejack said, fearing she was losing her friend again.

The unicorn smiled up at her. "You were right, Applejack. Perhaps… not *all* stallions are vile."

Applejack's eyes widened as she turned to the space between the trees that had captured her friend's attention, then back to her. The unicorn's pupils were dilated, and the emotion in her smile was unmistakable.

"You don't mean…?"

Rarity nodded excitedly. Applejack briefly glanced back at the path.

" *Him* ?"

"Uh-huh!" she nodded again.

The earth pony blinked. "Um…wow, that's, uh…I didn't really expect ya to…then again, y'all seemed to hit it off with the talkin' and the…" She frowned. "Isn't he like…forty or something?"

"I supposed he's a little young," Rarity smirked, "but I meet so few hundred-and-nineteen-year-olds these days. So I don't think I can afford to be persnickety." Her smile wavered a moment. "Oh, but I hardly know him. Sure, he made a good first impression, but…so did Tenderheart."

Applejack laid a hoof on her shoulder. "I'm sure he's not like Tenderheart. And hey, at least ya know he's not a vampire. He definitely smelled mortal."

"Indeed," Rarity grinned as she thought of his pleasant scent.

"Though you're right, ya don't know a lot about him. You should still be careful."

"Yes, yes, and…" She gasped suddenly. "I'm having dinner with him Saturday evening! Whatever am I to wear?!"

She zoomed into the castle, leaving Applejack to shake her head with a chuckle. She wasn't sure what to think of Rarity finding her mate. It had clearly affected her greatly, but what of the stallion? Would he be up for an immortal life? And what if he ended up hurting her like Tenderheart? Of course he couldn't do anything physically but there were other ways. That wouldn't bode well for either of them.

Well, at least Applejack knew that this new element was good for Rarity's self-esteem, and might divert her from her murderous habits. At least for a while.

By the time Applejack reached the front door, Rarity was already down the hall, most likely headed for her closet.

"Twilight!" Applejack called out as she entered the foyer. "Twilight! I've got something to tell ya! It's about the Sirens!"

"She's not here!" Rarity called, appearing on the upper landing. She had several gowns hovering over her head, one pressed to her chest. "She went out to check for that mysterious vampire she'd met last night!"

"But…if we were out, and Twilight's out, and Pinkie and Dash are at the tavern, and Discord's with…" Applejack gasped as her face turned paler. "No one was here with Spike?!"

Rarity cringed guiltily. "Well, I thought you were in your room when I…"

The earth mare ignored her and stormed up the stairs and down the hall of bedrooms. She threw open the door to Spike's room and sighed in relief when she saw the dragon snoring in bed.

"Thank Darkness," she heaved.

"See, he's fine," Rarity said, closing the door with her magic. "Alright, I apologize for leaving him alone, but really, what danger is he in here?"

"Well," Applejack murmured. "With the new vampire coven in town…"

"They can't come in without permission, and Spike knows not to let in any strangers."

"Right," the earth pony breathed steadily. "I just…I panicked for a moment."

Rarity cocked her head curiously at her. "Forgive me for being so nosy, Applejack, but…why are you always so protective over Spike?"

All the muscles in Applejack's face tensed at the question. "W-What do ya mean? He's our friend, and the only mortal in this castle. Y'all watch over him too."

"Yes, but…even before, when he and Twilight first came. You didn't object much to us taking blood from Twilight, nor did you bat an eye when she was turned. But when Spike so much as gets a papercut…"

"He's just young, that's all!" Applejack said quickly. "And, uh…more fragile! Look, I like the little guy, okay? He's a good dragon. I…I just don't want anything happenin' to him."

Rarity scrutinized her friend's nervous face. "If you say so."

As the unicorn returned to her fashion crisis, Applejack released all the air she hadn't realized she'd been holding in. Then she opened Spike's door again, this time by a crack. He was on his back, sprawled horizontally across the bed. With every exhale came a puff of smoke. Sometimes he'd snore out a flame. The canopy above his bed had been desecrated with charred spots and holes. Rarity had insisted on replacing it, but Spike had convinced her it was useless.

Applejack didn't mean to watch him for so long. It just put her mind at ease, knowing that he was still breathing.

Normally I don't write a lot of drinking scenes, but considering vampires are dead anyway, there wouldn't be any consequences. I don't know what the drinking laws were back then, but today in Romania the age is 18.

I know the region I'm describing wasn't called Germany back then, but since I didn't have any puns for Austria or Bavaria, and this is an alternate universe anyway, I just stuck with Germaneigh. Also didn't bother trying to make a pun of Neuschwanstein.

***Cu plăcere* = "you're welcome"**

domnişoare = plural for "Miss"

Games

WARNING: SUGGESTIVE/SEXUAL CONTENT AHEAD!

Some distance away from the castle, Twilight, in her bat form, was scouring the trees for intruders. Since her encounter with the fiery vampire last night, she had assessed all the dangers this trespasser could bring. Fluttershy was of interest to her, and she had clearly followed her to Count Discord's. Who's to say she wouldn't come back, perhaps to investigate Discord further and discover what he was? If she had friends, they might be lurking too.

Twilight had circled the forest seven times now and her wings were starting to feel weary, but she had to leave no stone unturned. Suppose she gave up and Phoenix chose that moment to appear? That's what she'd decided to call her, as she resembled a phoenix with her flaming mane. It was a pain not knowing her enemy's name.

This was just like when she had met the Sirens. Having little information about them, searching for them for the first several months had been a wild goose chase. Remembering this made her realize how much of a distraction Phoenix was from her ultimate goal. She should be looking for the Sirens, not this stranger who so far hadn't done anything to her. The Sirens were definite villains and had to be stopped.

She was turning back towards the castle when she heard a wing flap. Twilight spun around and scrutinized a group of birches. Flying upwards, she scaled the white trunks and wriggled into the branches. They were so thin, they were nearly impossible to hide behind, but she could've sworn the noise had come from here.

Then it came again, and Twilight powered her horn readily. Using the extra light, she searched again, but found nothing. Then she turned around and jumped back when she was met with an upside-down light yellow face.

"Gah!"

Sunset smirked in amusement. "Thought I'd find you out here."

Twilight gritted her teeth and increased the power in her horn.

"Whoa, take it easy!" the intruder said, swinging off the branch and flapping herself right-side-up. "I'm not here to fight!" She lowered her eyelids and leered. "But if *you* want to, I wouldn't object to it."

Her strange tone made Twilight cock her head in confusion. "Excuse me?"

Sunset lowered herself to the ground. Twilight followed, keeping a close eye on her adversary while not diminishing her horn.

"I just want us to have a little chat," Sunset said, folding her wings.

"Chat?" Twilight asked, even more bewildered.

"You know. Sit down," she powered her horn and summoned a tea table and chairs, "get to know each other," sat herself in one, "vampire-to-vampire," summoned two goblets, "have a few drinks?"

The lavender mare squinted at the set-up. "What are you playing at?"

"No playing. I just meet so few vampires. It's been so long since I've had some girl talk, you know?"

"Girl talk?"

"I just want to make up for invading your territory yesterday. Surely you wouldn't object to some good old-fashioned peacemaking."

It made sense. Twilight didn't want conflict to arise between their covens, if Phoenix belonged to one. If they talked things out, they might come to an understanding. Even better, she might get more information as to their intentions towards Fluttershy.

Still, she wasn't sure she could trust this mare. What if she too was just looking for information? It could be a trap. It was for this reason

that she did not change form.

Sunset sensed her reluctance and smiled innocently. "Come now, I even brought the wine."

Using her magic, she levitated a small brown squirrel into view. The poor thing was struggling to break free of its magical restraint. Twilight gasped as the squirrel's head suddenly spun around with a crack and its body fell limp. Unfazed, Sunset ripped off the head and began pouring its blood into one of the goblets while Twilight watched in horror and disgust.

"I'm not usually one for rodents," Sunset said as she yanked off the animal's tail and poured that end into the other goblet, "but I do enjoy a good squirrel treat. It might have to do with the fact that when I was mortal, I sucked on a lot of," she winked, "nuts."

A lump was forming in Twilight's throat. Sunset chuckled at her shocked expression.

"You look tense, Lavender," she said, tossing the squirrel corpse over her shoulder. "Sit down, relax," she levitated both goblets, "have a sip."

Twilight stared unsurely at the cup hovering in front of her. After that gruesome spectacle, she still had no reason to trust this mare. Then again, that squirrel blood smelled tempting. After much hesitance, she enveloped the goblet with her magic and sat across from Sunset, who was grinning in triumph.

"Cheers," she said, raising her cup to meet hers.

As Twilight brought the goblet to her lips, she noticed Sunset's expectant gaze, and how she seemed to be taking her time with her cup too. After a quick sniff of the blood, Twilight waited a second before tipping the goblet towards her mouth. Sunset did the same.

"So," she said, smacking her lips. "Let's start with the basic icebreakers. What's your name?"

Twilight lowered her cup, giving her a wary look. Sunset rolled her eyes with a grunt.

"Oh, come now! You don't expect me to keep calling you Lavender, do you?"

"Tell me your name first," Twilight demanded.

She hesitated. "Mine isn't important."

"Well, how can I trust you with my name if you can't trust me with yours?"

Sunset narrowed her gaze. This mare was very resilient, but she was bound to break at some point.

"Fine. Can you at least tell me who your master is?"

"Who's yours?"

Impatient, the fiery mare slammed her hoof on the table. "Quit dodging my questions!"

"I will. When *you* stop dodging *my* questions."

Sunset stood angrily. "I know what you're doing. It's not going to work."

Twilight rose to her eye-level. "What's not going to work?"

"You're using the repetition method, to avoid revealing anything crucial, but it won't help you for long." She looked down at Twilight's cup with a mischievous grin. "Once that truth spell takes full effect, you won't be able to resist."

The lavender mare's eyes widened. "You…you put a truth spell on my drink?"

Sunset smirked. "You can feel the words bubbling in your throat, fighting for freedom, can't you? Soon they'll spill, and I'll know everything I need to know from you. Honestly, I can't believe you fell for that! I took you to be a lot smarter!"

Twilight's cheeks puffed as she covered her mouth with both hooves. She fell back in her chair as she struggled to keep it shut.

Knowing she was victorious, Sunset leaned across the table and waited patiently.

"Tell me again, Lavender. What's your name?"

Defeated, Twilight lowered her hooves and muttered something.

"What was that?" Sunset asked, leaning closer.

Twilight looked up, raised her mouth to her adversary's ear and whispered, "Vlad the Impaler."

The fiery mare recoiled in surprise. "What?!"

It was hard for Twilight to hide her gloating smile. "Truth spell. Sneaky. At least, it would've been had I not smelled suspicious magic in that blood. In that split second before I drank it, I switched the blood in my cup with the blood in yours, so *you* drank the truth spell."

Staring down at her cup, Sunset backed away in fear. "You didn't. You…you sly little…"

Then she burst out laughing, confusing Twilight once again.

" *Not* ! I figured you would've pulled a trick like that! So I took precautions and cursed *both* cups, and counter-cursed mine once you drank yours!" She crossed her hooves. "The spell should be taking effect any minute now. So, I win."

Twilight looked at her in amazement. "Yes." Then she smirked again. "If I hadn't still been wary of what you had served, so I cast a spell to give the illusion that the blood was pouring into my mouth when in reality, it was pouring into a tiny portal that emptied out under the table here!"

She pointed to the ground and sure enough, there was a small pool of fresh blood. Sunset gaped at the spill, and then at Twilight, whose hooves were crossed in triumph. She expected the fiery mare to throw a fit, but instead, she slowly clapped her hooves together.

"Well played," she chuckled, shaking her head. "I must say,

excellently played! I *knew* there was something special about you!" She looked at the lavender mare with interest. "I wonder just how smart you are." She leaned across the table again. "If you were being thrown in a dungeon, and you had a choice between three of them, which one would you choose? The one with scorching hot flames, the one with lions who haven't eaten in three weeks, or the one filled with poisonous gas?"

Twilight leaned forward too. "The lions, because if they hadn't eaten in three weeks, they'd be dead."

"Good," Sunset commended, but she wasn't giving up. "Now imagine you're in a rowboat, and it's sinking. You have no oars, and you can't swim. How do you survive?"

"I stop imagining."

"If all the windows are facing south, what color is the bear?"

"White, because it's a polar bear. The only place where every direction is south is the North Pole."

Determined to stump her, Sunset leaned closer. "Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

Accepting her challenge, Twilight leaned further too so that their muzzles were a centimeter apart. "That riddle, first dictated in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* , initially had no answer, though some have attempted to answer it. 'Edgar Allan Pony wrote on both,' 'they both start with "r" sounds,' *or* , you could go with the answer the author Lewis Carrot produced himself: 'because it can produce a few notes, though they are very flat; and it is never put with the wrong end in front!' The second part would've been more humorous had Carrot's editor not changed his spelling of 'never' as N-E-V-A-R, which is 'raven' backwards. So, which answer do you prefer?"

Sunset said nothing, only stared unblinkingly at her. After a while, they found themselves in a staring contest, one that they were both intent on winning, by any means necessary. Sunset used her magic to poke Twilight's rear with a stick, but she didn't even flinch and used that same stick to smack her foe in the back of the head. Then

Sunset tried uprooting a tree, thinking the sound of its fall would alarm her opponent. Instead, Twilight responded by levitating the tree back in its place. And they did all this without moving a muscle, their red eyes burning into each other.

Finally, Sunset smirked and tapped Twilight on the nose, snapping her out of focus.

"You're just adorable, you know that?"

"That's cheating!" Twilight protested.

Her adversary only cackled. "Oh, you are *hilarious* ! And smart, too!" Curious, she rubbed her chin. "I wonder how good you'd be in a fight."

This mare had a habit of befuddling Twilight. "I thought you didn't want to fight."

She licked her lips in anticipation. "Well, if you're *offering* …"

This sensual gesture threw the lavender mare off. It didn't help that Sunset was inching around the table, her body pressed provocatively against its rim.

"Not a full-on battle, of course, but a friendly spar? A duel, perhaps? I'm just *itching* to see you in combat."

Twilight tried backing away, but that only led her into an oak. Seeing the opportunity, Sunset trapped her by lunging her hooves on either side of the lavender mare's head.

"So what do you say, Lavender? How about you and me get into a little tumble?"

"W-What?" Twilight squeaked.

"What's the matter? You afraid to go up against me? Don't think you can handle me?" She scoffed. "Well, I *am* pretty tough. No matter how *good* you are, I doubt you'll get out of it without a scrape. Or do you like it rough?"

The younger vampire swayed in disorientation. Why did it sound like she was describing something entirely different and…inappropriate?

"All I'm saying is that we give it a whirl and see who comes out on top."

That was the last straw. Shaking out of her thoughts, Twilight pushed Sunset to the ground and stood boldly over her with her wings spread open.

"I'm not going to fight you unless you give me a reason to."

Sunset scowled as she jumped to her hooves. "Watch it, Lavender. You don't want to cross me."

"You wanted a fight, didn't you?"

"Oh yes, but you don't want to fight me when I'm angry." She stepped closer and hissed, "I might not hesitate to kill."

Twilight returned her glare. "What say we go our separate ways before this gets out of hoof?"

"Oh no, you don't! You're not getting out of this so easily, Lavender!"

"Stop calling me that!"

"Well, until I have your real name, what else am I to call you?"

"Alright then. Rudimentary nicknames it is, *Phoenix* !"

The anger drained from Sunset's face. "What did you call me?"

"Your hair is like fire. 'Phoenix' seemed appropriate."

She blinked. "My…my mate calls me that."

Twilight paused. "You have a *mate* ?"

Sunset mentally kicked herself for revealing that detail. "Hey, you tricked me!"

" *I* didn't do anything. You let that slip yourself. So exactly how many

of you are there?"

It was as if she *had* been cursed by a truth spell. If she stayed any longer, she might spoil everything, and Trenderhoof would be angry with her.

"This isn't over, Lavender!"

She opened her wings to fly when Twilight called, "Wait! Before you go, I just want to make one thing clear."

She stepped closer, so that Sunset could see the seriousness in her face. "We have a claim on the Lady Fluttershy. If you so much as harm her, expect war."

Sunset smirked. "So be it then."

Twilight recoiled in puzzlement at how unintimidated her adversary was. "Huh?"

The fiery mare rose into the air, smiling mockingly down at her. "If it comes down to war, Lavender, you and me will have that fight. Until then," she giggled, giving a teasing wave, "I'll be waiting."

With a strong flap, she whooshed into the sky and hollered, "Then we'll see who ends up on top!"

That last sentence lingered in Twilight's brain for a good long while after the vampire had vanished. She knew what she'd meant, but why had it sounded so profane coming from her gloating mouth? Twilight massaged her temple as she looked at the table Phoenix had forgotten to clean up. She tried making sense of what had just happened: the drinks, the banter, the mind puzzles, Phoenix pressing her against a tree and making suggestive threats.

Had this been a confrontation or a seduction?

"Don't be silly, Twilight!" she chuckled to herself. "I mean she's a mare and you're a mare. Plus, she has a mate! She was probably just trying to throw you off!" She paused. "Right?"

"Trend!" Sunset called as she entered her mate's bedroom. "Guess what I found out about…?"

But the Dazzlings were there, sitting on the bed with Trenderhoof standing over them. He turned to her with a smile.

"Sunset, come in. The Dazzlings were just telling me what they found out about the local vampire coven."

She looked at the sisters with wide eyes. "You what?"

"We ran into three of them at the tavern," said Aria.

"They didn't trust us very well," Adagio explained. "But we did learn that they have a permanent residence here, and that there are six of them in total."

"The pink one's also been to the *Asseeloom* !" Sonata squealed. "We have so much in common!"

"Also that vampire you ran into yesterday is definitely part of their coven."

"They were so uptight," Aria groaned, rolling her eyes. "They told us to cut down on the blood because it drew attention to them or whatever. If you ask me, they were more interested in ale than blood."

"Ale?" Trenderhoof said, raising an eyebrow. "They were drinking *ale* ?"

"Yeah, that surprised us too."

"Six, you say?" he asked as he began pacing the room. "Let's see, there's the three at the tavern, Sunset's friend, one unaccounted for and then the master. You certain they didn't give you a clue as to who that is?"

Adagio shook her head. "They were reluctant to give his name. I think he might be famous, like you. Perhaps it is this Count Discord."

"Perhaps. Shame you couldn't find out for sure. Did you at least get

the mares' names?"

"Certainly. One was called Rainbow Dash, who was dressed like a stallion, and…what was the pink one's name?"

"Pinkie Pie!" Sonata piped. "I remember because she was pink!"

"Right. And the last one was…Apple-something…"

"Applejack," Aria corrected.

Trenderhoof stopped in his tracks. His back was to them, but Sunset could tell something had startled him.

"Did you say Applejack?" he asked in surprise.

"Uh-huh," Aria nodded. "Some country mare."

"And a *real* stiff!" Sonata huffed.

The stallion smiled to himself. "Well, fancy that…" He turned back to the Dazzlings. "Good work, girls. This is all very useful information."

"Hey!" Sunset cried out in jealousy. "I found some things out too! From that lavender unicorn! I saw her again!"

"Oh? And what, pray tell, did you find out from her?"

"Well, she knows her magic, and is very intelligent. I asked her the raven like a writing desk riddle and do you know what her answer was?"

"Did you find out who her master is?" Trenderhoof asked bluntly.

She frowned. "Well, no, uh…"

"Where they all gather?"

"No, but…"

"What *her* name is?"

"Err, no, she…"

"So you found out nothing."

"I found out something! She told me to go away because they had a claim on Lady Fluttershy…"

"Which we'd already figured. So, nothing."

Sunset choked on her words, uttering only half-vowel sounds. Then she sighed and hung her head.

"It would appear so."

Trenderhoof rolled his eyes. "The Dazzlings found out how many are in their clan, three of their names. What were *you* doing all that time?"

"I cast a truth spell! But she avoided it. See, I cursed both our cups and…"

He cut her off with his hoof. "I've heard enough. Girls, leave us."

As the Dazzlings left the room, they all sent Sunset gloating smirks. She returned them with a furious glare. When the door was shut, Trenderhoof shook his head.

"You disappoint me, Sunset. You used to be so good at this sort of thing, but it seems after all these years you might be losing your touch."

"Losing my touch?" she fumed, her shoulders tensing. " *Losing my touch* ?!"

"I can understand. Some skills fade as one gets older. The Dazzlings are only a few years old, so they have a fresher approach…"

That did it. With a determined grunt, she pounced on Trenderhoof and pinned him to the bed.

"Losing my touch, huh?" she growled through her teeth as she used her magic to undo his trousers. "Let's see if you still think that when I'm through with you!"

Twenty minutes later, they were lying naked side by side, not touching one another as they stared up at the ceiling. Trenderhoof looked bored while Sunset was cringing in embarrassment.

"I…I'm sorry, I…I don't know what's wrong with me. That's never happened to me before."

"It's alright, darling," he sighed blandly. "It happens to every pony. And with ten years of us going at it, you were bound to hiccup sooner or later."

She gaped at him. "I'm *twenty-eight* !"

He shrugged. "Mares lose their ability sooner."

"That's it!" she exclaimed, fiercely climbing over him. "We're doing this again!"

He rolled his eyes. "Alright, but you're going to have to try something different this time."

She raised an eyebrow. "Like what?"

"I don't know. Use your imagination. Visualize something that…gets you excited."

"Something that gets me excited, huh?"

She pondered on what aroused her most. Clearly Trenderhoof wasn't the answer, since he was already here. She liked tormenting ponies and draining them of their blood, but when she tried visualizing a helpless pony writhing in her grasp, it got dull. Torturing was fun, but too easy when the victim was powerless. One-on-one duels with other vampires were even more entertaining.

Then she thought of the lavender unicorn and the talent she'd exhibited tonight. Oh, Sunset was more eager than ever to battle her now! She imagined what it would be like. She'd cast an attack shot and Lavender would repel. Then she'd fire a beam which Sunset would dodge. Her moves would be tactful, a perfect match for

Sunset's. This would go on for hours, until Sunset would end it by paralyzing her adversary's horn and then declare her victory by pinning her to the ground.

She'd be under her, stubbornly fighting to rise, but Sunset wouldn't let her get away so easily. She'd keep her in her hold, until Lavender understood that *she* was the better vampire. Then she would surrender herself to her, and then…and then…

"Darkness, dear!" Trenderhoof cried out in surprise pleasure. "What in the world are you thinking of?"

Sunset stopped her movements and bit her lip awkwardly. "Um, err…uh…blood?"

It was the first time Discord had ever slept at night. Fortunately, when he woke, the sun hadn't risen yet. But the sky was gray, so it would be soon. However, he wasn't in any hurry, as he was gazing in awe at the beautiful mare sleeping beside him. He was coiled around her, like a dragon guarding his treasure. Her head was pillowed against his chest. She had opened his shirt somewhat so she could snuggle in his brown fur. That was just about as much undressing as they had done last night. Even his cape was still on, draping over them both.

She looked so peaceful, so innocent. It was a shame he couldn't see her in the morning light, but her sweet smile was enough to illuminate her face. He grinned as he ran his claw through her silky mane. He never wanted to wake up again without seeing this beauty.

He understood now why Fate had brought them together. She had a heart bigger than any he had ever known, filled with so much kindness and compassion that she was able to see past his horrifying exterior and sinful habits and find the goodness within him. And his life was so dark, so chaotic, that she was the only thing that made sense. He knew, now that he was waking up to her sweetness, that he couldn't live without her.

Daylight was nearing and he had to get going. So after planting a kiss on the top of her head, he began uncoiling. Fluttershy moaned in dissatisfaction as his arms slid away from her and she tried grabbing them to keep them in place.

"Discord?" she grumbled.

"Shhh," he whispered, kneeling at the bedside. "I can't stay, my love. The sun will be coming up soon. I need to get back to my castle."

She opened her heavy eyelids so she could look at his blurred image. "Will I see you again? Tonight?"

He grinned and took her hoof. "Tonight, my love. I promise."

She smiled softly at him before slipping back into her sleep. He squeezed her hoof affectionately before slowly rising and finally releasing her completely. It was strange not to be holding her, but it didn't matter. He would hold her again tonight. She *wanted* him to hold her.

This was a moment he would never forget for as long as he lived, and thanks to her, that would be quite a while.

The dungeon and boat brain teasers were from a book a friend had shown me some time ago. I don't remember what it was called. The bear one was from "Young Sherlock Holmes."

Dreams

Fluttershy couldn't stop smiling from the moment she awoke, knowing what had happened last night. Discord had kissed her. *Really* kissed her, and touched her in places she blushed to think about. Oh, but he had been gentle about it, and never did more than what she was comfortable with. And then he had held her, guarded her. She had never felt safer, happier, more complete than she had that entire night in his arms. She didn't even care that her cheeks were still pink by the time she entered the dining room. Late, as her aunt didn't hesitate to point out.

"Sleep well, domnişoară?" Trenderhoof inquired.

"Mmm-hmm," Fluttershy moaned blissfully as she took her seat.

Starlight cocked her eyebrow. "Are you alright, dear? Do you have a fever? Your face looks a little red. Or did you simply put on too much rouge?"

"I'm fine, Auntie," she sighed. "In fact, I'm wonderful."

"Pardon me?"

Trenderhoof smirked. "I'm sure your niece simply had some pleasant dreams. Am I right, domni—?"

He paused when he noticed the sun-shaped pendant around her neck. Sunset remarked it too and pushed her chair back a centimeter.

"That's a," Trenderhoof cleared his throat, "lovely necklace you have there, domnişoară. Where did you get it?"

Starlight squinted at the pendant. "Yes, I…I don't believe I've seen that before, dear."

"Hmm?" Fluttershy uttered, glancing down. "Oh! A gift from Count Discord."

Trenderhoof's eyes widened. "Count Discord, you say?"

He sent Sunset a sideways glance. She looked as if she had reached the same conclusion. Count Discord knew they were after her. But if he was a vampire himself, why did he give Fluttershy the means to repel him? It was curious business.

"I think it's about time we met this Count Discord," Trenderhoof said aloud.

Fluttershy frowned. "Oh. He…he's not much for company."

"But he's coming to Lord Fancy Pants' dinner party tomorrow evening!" Starlight exclaimed.

Fluttershy looked at her aunt in alarm. "He is?"

"Yes!" she grunted through her teeth. "We have made sure of it. *Right* , dear?"

She understood what her aunt was insinuating. But how could she ask Discord to come to Fancy Pants' dinner party? After all, a lot of ponies were going to be there, and he couldn't hypnotize all of them. Could he? Even so, with his inability to keep up a disguise for more than an hour, and the fact that he couldn't consume real food, it was sure to be a problem.

Applejack and Spike were in a sunny apple orchard, the former bucking the tree trunks while the latter ran to catch the falling fruit in a basket. The mare couldn't help but giggle at how frantically his tiny legs were moving.

"Ya don't have to catch 'em, Sugar Cube. We can just pick 'em off the ground."

"I can do it!" he insisted as he scampered to and fro. "See? I can—AH!"

He cried out as he stepped on a stray apple and slid backward. The apples were chucked from the basket and into the air. A good

number of them clunked onto his head. Spike had to use the basket as a helmet.

"Ow, ow, ow!" he shrieked. "Why take your anger out on *me* ? *She's* the one who was making you fall!"

Applejack laughed as she lifted the basket to uncover his reptilian eyes. "They're tryin' to tell ya that you're in over yerr head. I told ya. Ya don't have to do this. I don't need help."

Spike only grinned as he tossed off the basket. "But I wanna help."

She smiled back as she picked up one of the fallen apples and sighed. "I really miss the taste of apples."

"I'll taste 'em for the both of us." He took the apple and bit into it. "Mmm," he mused with his mouth full. "Sweet, crunchy, juicy, with a sharp but succulent texture and…" He trailed off when he noticed Applejack's watering mouth. "Is this making it better or worse?"

"It's okay," she smirked, patting him on the head. "At least one of us gets to eat 'em."

He shook his head. "You shouldn't hate being a vampire, AJ."

"Well, it's not something I asked for."

"But there's gotta be *some* good thing about your life right now. What about all your friends?"

"I love 'em as much as you do, but…" She sighed sadly. "My family…"

"I never knew my real family. Twilight, her brother and parents are the only real family I've ever known. Don't Discord, Pinkie, Rarity and Rainbow feel that way to you?"

She shrugged. "I guess. But they're not enough to keep me going."

"What *is* enough?"

She looked out at the horizon. "For a while, it was the idea of

destroyin' the bastard that did this to me. But then…"

She trailed off as he took her hoof, as if he understood.

"Not *one* perk to being a vampire?" he teased.

She smiled. "Well, I'll give it one thing. If I hadn't turned, I never would've met you. And I never would've known…" She frowned as she slipped her hoof out of his claw. "…that I'm gonna have to learn to live without ya."

"You don't have to, you know?" he said, gazing up at her with pleading eyes. "I *want* to be like you."

"I don't know what that'll do to ya, Spike. You…you might not be the same."

"Why not? *You* turned out alright."

"Think of Rarity. She never hurt any pony before she was turned. And me, I wasn't this…this…hopeless!"

He took her hoof again. "You're *not* hopeless. You're a wonderful, strong, independent mare. That's what I love most about you."

She shook her head as she yanked her hoof away. "You don't feel that way about me. You feel that way about Rarity."

"But I'm not destined for Rarity!"

"It doesn't matter who you're destined for!" she spat through her tears. "What matters is who ya *deserve* ! And it's *not* …"

Thunder struck and they both nearly jumped out of their skins. The sky grew dark and a cold wind blew. Applejack glanced frantically around the orchard as the apples shriveled into giant raisins. A low cackle echoed throughout the field.

"Did you really think you could escape me?

"No," she uttered, falling to her knees and cradling her head. "No, please! Get out of here! Leave me alone!"

"How can I leave you alone, AJ, when you won't *let* me leave?"

"No! You're not real!"

"Oh, but I am! Or did you forget? I'm still out there. In *here* ."

She felt a hoof on her forehead and snapped up, but no one was there. As she searched for the source of the voice, Spike let out a horrified shriek. When Applejack turned, the dragon was on his knees, a dark figure biting into his neck.

"NO!" she screamed.

Rushing to Spike, she shooed the figure away and it evaporated into thin air. She caught the dragon in her hooves.

"Spike?" she called, gently slapping his face. "Spike! Spike, breathe!"

His eyes were open, but he was still. All the life was gone from him.

"Oh, Spike," she sobbed into his chest. "Please, don't leave me."

"You should've changed him when you had the chance," the voice taunted.

"Stop it!" she screamed at the void. "Stop tormentin' me!"

"You torment yourself. I just did what you were afraid to do."

"No! You've already taken my life away! You will not take Spike too!"

Something grabbed her from behind and pulled her against it. She gasped as she felt cold breath on her neck.

"I *will* come for you. And we'll finish what we started."

A pair of fangs stabbed into her flesh. Applejack screamed for help, but there was no one to hear her. Spike was dead.

There was no point in fighting.

"Spike," she croaked with what little breath she had left. "Spike…"

"BOO!"

Applejack opened her eyes and shrieked to see a horrifying face above her, laughing mockingly. Discord ripped off the monster mask and held his sides as he continued guffawing.

"Oh, you should've seen your face! Absolutely *priceless* !"

"What the…how…?" Applejack stammered, sitting up in her coffin. "Discord, what is…?"

"Isn't it a beautiful day?" he mused. "Well, I wouldn't know, obviously, but I feel *great* ! Like I'm a hundred years old again! I think I'm gonna go scare Rainbow Dash now!"

He replaced his mask and chuckled mischievously as he hovered out the door. Applejack put her hoof to her head as she tried to recollect her vision. Then she looked up in panic.

"Spike."

Springing out of her coffin, she headed for the dragon's room.

"Spike?!"

But his bed was empty. She began racing down the halls, until Rainbow's shrieks and Discord's laughter faded into the background. She tried the entrance hall, then the ballroom, then the kitchen, all the while calling his name.

"Spike?! Where are ya?!"

Finally she tried the library. Twilight, sitting at a long table, looked up from the book she was reading with a start.

"Applejack! What brings you…?"

"Where's Spike?!" Applejack demanded, slamming her hooves on the table.

The unicorn jumped back. "He's, uh, in the back. Taking a nap."

"Nap?" she breathed as she trudged toward the back shelves.

"Yeah, he was doing some research with me but he got a little…"

Sure enough, the dragon was slumped over a pile of books, one open on his chest, rising and falling with it as he snored. Seeing that he was safe and breathing, Applejack let out a sigh of relief.

"Thank Darkness."

"Did something happen?"

Applejack turned back to the unicorn, who looked greatly confused. "Huh?"

"Well you *did* just barge in here all crazily demanding to see Spike. Do you need him for something?"

"Oh no, I just…wanted to make sure he was okay."

"Yeah, he's okay. Why wouldn't he be?"

"Nothing," Applejack sighed as she rubbed her temple. "I just had a bad…"

She paused as she caught Twilight's bewildered expression.

"Never mind. Whatchya doin'?"

"Reading over some of the spell books Zecora lent me," the unicorn explained. "I've tried every divination spell I've come across, but so far I've had no luck finding the Sirens. I can see their shapes, hear their voices, but still nothing! The only clear image I've seen is…"

She stopped herself by biting her lip. Applejack wasn't comfortable talking about her problems with someone, but since Twilight was currently studying the subject, perhaps she could be of help.

"Twilight," the earth mare said, sitting across from her. "That divination stuff relates to dreams too, right?"

"Yes," Twilight nodded. "Dreams can be a way of foreseeing the

future or understanding one's psyche. Of course, since I'm a vampire, that method is useless until I meet my mate."

"Ya mean ya haven't been dreamin' at all? But I thought Flash was…"

"I thought so too. But I didn't meet him as a vampire. Or maybe he wasn't the one for me at all, which I highly doubt."

"Well, do you suppose, if vampires start dreamin' when they meet their mate, they can have… *nightmares* too?"

Twilight rubbed her chin in thought. "Well, in theory, once a vampire is turned, many of their bodily functions shut down, the circulatory and respiratory systems for instance, as well as areas of the brain. But when one meets their mate, some of those parts are reawakened, such as the limbic system which is responsible for emotions and memories and…"

"The *short* version, please?" Applejack demanded bluntly.

"Right. I guess a simpler way to explain it is that the meeting of one's mate opens a window to the subconscious, allowing for dreams to happen, pleasant and unpleasant." She tilted her head at her friend. "Why do you ask?"

"Uh…" the earth mare stammered, glancing awkwardly to the side. "Um…Rarity! She had a nightmare."

"Rarity? But how could she have…?"

"She met her mate! Last night. And she's been dreamin'!"

"Oh, how wonderful!" Twilight smiled brightly. "Who?"

"Some lord named Fancy Pants."

"Lord Fancy Pants? I met him once when I was investigating Pinkie's massacre. He was a very kind stallion. Quite the gentlecolt. And he has a very lush mansion and a vast fortune."

Applejack smirked. "Rarity would certainly like that."

"But why would she be having nightmares? And what does that have to do with you bursting in here and screaming for Spike as if he had just been kidnapped or something?"

"Uh…the nightmare was about Spike! I just came to check for…"

She trailed off as Twilight crossed her hooves.

"You're not buyin' any of this, are ya?"

The unicorn shook her head. Applejack sighed in defeat.

"Alright, alright! Guess there's no use crawlin' out of this one. But ya can't tell any pony, *especially* Spike!"

"My lips are sealed," Twilight vowed, slashing her hoof across her mouth.

Applejack looked down nervously at her lap. " *I* had a nightmare. It… it involved Spike."

Twilight's eyes widened and she glanced back to where the little dragon was snoring. Then she turned back to her friend and leaned forward to whisper.

"Is he…?"

Applejack nodded. Twilight squealed excitedly.

"Oh my Darkness!"

"Shush!" the earth mare hissed.

"Right. When… *how* did this happen? I mean… *Spike* ?!"

Heaving another sigh, Applejack slumped back in her seat. "It didn't happen right away, not like it did with Discord. Remember when you and Spike first came here? I was the one to answer the door?"

Twilight nodded and only now recalled how the earth mare had hardly taken her eyes off the dragon that entire afternoon.

"Well, I'd never seen a dragon before, and he was cute. That's all it

was. He was cute and I was curious about him. Then Pinkie came flyin' down the stairs all crazy-like. I was about to push Spike out of the way, but he beat me to it. He tackled me to the ground, spread out his tiny arms in front of me and waved his tiny notebook at Pinkie, shouting, 'You want her? You're gonna have to go through me, first!'"

She smiled at the memory. "Of course, he didn't know what I was then. After y'all found out and made arrangements with Discord, I came to his room later and asked why he had bothered to save me. I was a complete stranger and he had known you all his life, so why me and not you? And ya know what he said?"

She looked up at the ceiling and recited the words as if she had gone over them dozens of times. "'I know Twilight. She's strong enough to take care of herself. But I didn't know you well enough to know if you were the same. Clearly, I was wrong, and you are strong, but you had seemed so nice that I felt compelled to protect you. It just seemed like the noble thing to do.'"

Grinning, she placed her hoof over her heart. "And that's when it happened."

Twilight had been listening to the whole story with her elbows propped onto the table and her head settled in her hooves. "Wow. How come you haven't told any pony? Or Spike, for that matter?"

Applejack frowned. "Lots of reasons. For one thing, he's a dragon."

"So? Discord's a draconequus and he and Fluttershy seem to be getting along fine."

"For another, he's fifteen and I'm forty. Doesn't that only work when it's the other way around?"

"No pony says you have to bite him right away. Biologically, you're still twenty as you're not getting any older. You can afford to wait until he's mature enough."

"That's the *main* problem! I don't *wanna* wait till he's older. That is, I don't wanna bite him *at all* ."

Twilight lowered her hooves onto her book. "What do you mean?"

"I've thought about it, Twilight, and I don't see a future for me and Spike."

"Of *course* you have a future. Fate's decreed it."

"I don't care what Fate or whatever is responsible for this says. If I change Spike, he'll become like me. Possibly worse, as it might have a different effect on him. I know what this kind of life entails, and I don't want that for him. He's too sweet, too innocent to become a monster. Besides," she murmured, hanging her head, "he has an eye for Rarity."

"But he's meant for *you* , not Rarity. I mean she has a mate now and…" She put her hoof to her mouth and looked back at the sleeping dragon. "Oh, he's not going to be happy when he hears that."

"That's all I can do for him. Be there for him when he needs me, protect him, make sure he doesn't get hurt."

"So *that's* why you were always shaky about taking blood from him! Oh, Applejack! I had no idea!"

"That's okay. I made sure it was kept secret."

"But…I've seen you touch him. Without asking."

The unicorn paused and smacked her forehead when she remembered the first few weeks she and Spike had spent at the castle. Applejack had hesitated to touch Spike without permission, even if it was just a tap on the shoulder. If Twilight had known about the mating laws then, she would've immediately put the pieces together.

"I asked for the first few weeks," Applejack confirmed, "but then he got all weirded out and said I didn't have to ask. That gave me leave. That isn't to say I haven't been respectful of him. I don't do more than I have to."

"You have to tell him, Applejack."

"No. No, he must never know."

"But you two are destined for one another…"

"Destined," the earth mare scoffed. "I was supposed to be destined to work on the farm with my family for the rest of my days. But do I have that? No. Instead, I'm destined to live eternity, to watch my little sister grow up without me, to outlive my brother, my nieces and nephews whom I'll never get to meet, to be unable to have a family of my own," she looked past Twilight, "to live without the one I love."

"But you *can* live with him. If you just talk to him about it…"

"The day Spike's heart stops beating is the day I kill myself!"

Aghast, Twilight stared silently at her friend. Applejack shook her head with a sigh.

"There are two things I live for: destroyin' the monster that did this to me, and seein' that Spike lives a long life. If Tenderheart is still alive when Spike isn't, then I'll die when he does." She looked at the unicorn morbidly. "He was in my dream. Tenderheart, he…he…"

She glanced at Spike again and Twilight understood.

"He's comin', Twilight. I know it. He sired me. I have a connection with him. He's gonna try and finish what he started. And if he finds out about Spike…"

Bloody tears filled her eyes. The unicorn stood and rushed around the table to her side. Applejack didn't object when she tenderly put her hooves around her.

"It could be just a dream," Twilight assured her. "Dreams manifest from your negative emotions as well as your positive ones. You're afraid of him coming back, but it's more than that. You're afraid of losing Spike."

"I won't deny it," Applejack sniffed, shaking her head, "but I'm tellin' you. He'll find me, and he won't rest until he's taken away everything and everyone I love. After all, he did it once before."

"Even if he *does* come back. We won't let it happen. I know what you're going through. I too am seeking to end my own vendetta. The Sirens took everything from me."

"The Sirens!" Applejack exclaimed suddenly. "I nearly forgot! Ya came home late last night and with all the excitement from Rarity's soulmate and the drinkin'…"

"Drinking?!" Twilight shouted in shock.

"Not *that* kind of drinkin'. Anyway, Rainbow, Pinkie and I were at the tavern, and we ran into these three other vampires."

The unicorn tapped her chin and began pacing. "So there *is* more to Phoenix's coven."

"Phoenix?"

"The mare I met the other night. You were saying, about those three vampires?"

"Well, they were singin'."

"Singing?!" the unicorn exclaimed, stopping in her tracks.

"And the stallions seemed to be under their spell."

"The Sirens," she muttered under her breath.

"No doubt about it. But they called themselves the Dazzlings. They had some fancy musical-type names too. I think they were…Adagio, Aria and Sonata."

"The Dazzlings," Twilight said, narrowing her eyes as she leaned onto the table. "What else did the tell you?"

"They said there were five of 'em total, includin' the mare you bumped into last night, but they wouldn't name their master."

"Five, eh? That would make the master…Phoenix's mate."

Applejack raised an eyebrow. "Pardon?"

"I met with Phoenix again last night. She just showed up out of the blue, said she wanted to talk. She was very discreet about herself, but she mentioned having a mate. If the Sirens are part of her coven, and there are five of them in all, her mate must be the master. The question is: who is it?"

"They hinted that it was some pony famous."

"Aha!" Twilight cried out suddenly.

She raced back to her pile of books and started flipping through the pages with her magic.

"What are ya doin'?"

"Now I know why I kept seeing Phoenix! She's connected to the Sirens! And I've had more contact with her than them! If I can pinpoint her exact location…"

"…you'll find the Sirens too."

The unicorn nodded. "Thank you, Applejack! It should be much easier to find them now!"

Applejack smiled softly as she stood. "Well, I can see you're busy. I'll just get out of yerr way then." She began to walk out of the library. "Oh, by the way, Lord Fancy Pants invited Rarity and the Master to a dinner party tomorrow night and Rarity said they'd be there."

"Mmm-hmm," Twilight mumbled, still transfixed on her books.

Applejack rolled her eyes as she took her leave, but not without stealing one last glance at Spike's snoring figure. After a while, Twilight looked up from her current book in alarm.

"Rarity did *what* ?!"

Hours passed in the library, but it didn't feel long to Twilight. She was too wrapped up in Zecora's spell books to be aware of her surroundings. When Spike awoke and asked to be excused, she

answered with a disinterested "mmm-hmm." When Discord made one of her books explode confetti into her face upon opening it, she didn't even bat an eyelash. It took the pranking draconequus a whoopee cushion and several water balloons before he gave up.

Now that she had a proper lead, Twilight was set on her task, rereading every spell that looked useful until they were committed to her memory. Every now and then she tried one, but the same image appeared: Phoenix. For some reason she was more on her mind than the Sirens. At least now she knew their names, but what was Phoenix's real name?

The fact that she hadn't had a full night's sleep in three days didn't help her concentration either. While vampires didn't need as much rest as mortals, they still needed to rejuvenate, especially after feeding or using their supernatural powers. With Twilight testing so many spells and sleeping so little, she was especially weary.

Finally, it came to a point where the words on the page blurred before her eyes and she found herself reading the same sentence over and over. Letting out a yawn, she massaged her head, which was screaming from all the overexertion. At last, she surrendered to her exhaustion and folded her hooves over her book, making a cushion for her head. Even as she closed her eyes, the Sirens and the mysterious mare were still on her mind. She had to find them. All of them. Three were for revenge, the other…she wasn't sure. Curiosity, at most. She didn't know who she was more interested in.

"So *this* is where you work."

Twilight's head snapped up at the low female voice. Phoenix was standing across the table, smiling mischievously. She was in her pony form, which meant her fur was lighter and smoother, her mane wasn't as tangled, but her eyes were still red. Twilight immediately stood from her seat, knocking her chair backward.

"How'd you get in?"

The intruder chuckled as she slowly made her way around the table. "Your dragon let me in."

Twilight's eyes widened in horror. "You didn't!"

"Relax, he's fine! I don't eat dragons." She stuck out her tongue. "Their scaly hides are too tough. Though he is…resting awhile."

Twilight powered her horn as her eyes reddened.

"Oh, there's no need for that," Phoenix purred.

She was at the table's middle, pressing her body provokingly against the edge. Her eyes were fixated on Twilight's.

"I hear you're looking for the Sirens. I can help you with that."

"And why should I trust you?" Twilight demanded gruffly.

Phoenix licked her lips as she inched towards her. "Because I'm your only key to finding them."

"Tell me where they are then."

"Well I'm not going to just *tell* you. What would be the fun in that?"

Twilight growled as her horn glowed brighter. Then Phoenix surprised her by lifting her hoof to her face. The lavender mare's eyes softened and her horn diminished as the light yellow hoof caressed the surface of her skin, tracing the dark circles under her eyes.

"You look worn out, Lavender," the seductress whispered. "When's the last time you slept?" She levitated the chair back into place. "You need to *relax* ."

As if by some spell Twilight obediently lowered herself into the chair. Phoenix's hoof moved down and across to her shoulder as she circled the chair.

"Here, why don't I help you get comfortable?"

Twilight tensed as she felt a second hoof on her other shoulder.

"Oh my, so taut! You need to loosen up a bit."

She snapped out of her thoughts and narrowed her eyes. She had to be firm.

"Get your hooves off—ME!"

She squealed as the strong but soft hooves dug into her shoulders, loosening the knots in her muscles.

"Oh," she uttered in sudden bliss.

She could feel Phoenix's triumphant grin on her. "You've been working too hard, worrying too much. You spend so much time seeking answers, you fail to see that all the answers you need are right in front of you."

"Hmm?" Twilight moaned, closing her eyes as she relaxed into the massage.

"Stop looking far away and look at what's nearby. Then you'll find what you're searching for."

"But where? How? I don't understand."

She could feel Phoenix's breath on her neck, as she bent down to whisper in her ear.

"Just follow your instincts."

Twilight opened her eyes in confusion. "What do you mean? I *have* been following my instincts. It was my instinct to come to Zebiu, to make myself a vampire, to take pages out of Zecora's book! Literally! What else could I possibly…?"

She trailed off as she felt a light pressure on her earlobe. When it suddenly became sharper, she realized it was teeth.

"W-What are you doing?" Twilight stammered.

Phoenix chuckled as her mouth moved to her throat. "Following my instincts."

Twilight gasped as her eyes opened and her head sprung up from

her book. Panting heavily, she glanced around the library. She was alone. But it didn't feel that way. She could still feel the mare's cold lips on her neck, her hooves driving into her shoulders, and a peculiar pounding between her legs she had not felt in a long time.

"What," she heaved, "the *hell* ?!"

Fluttershy waited excitedly at the window and lit up with joy as she saw her love approach. She opened the window and welcomed him with her lips. Discord willingly accepted them, immediately entangling his paw in her hair.

Suddenly there was a squeak and two tiny paws shoved them apart. Angel chirped angrily at Discord and then scolded Fluttershy for her indiscretion. Finally, the pegasus opened her eyes very wide in a way that it seemed to exert some sort of power on the bunny, for he recoiled in fear. After shivering under her intense stare, he at last gave in and hopped off the windowsill and scampered under the bed. Discord watched the entire spectacle in amazement.

"How did you do that?"

"Oh," Fluttershy blushed. "It's just…a little something my mother taught me, to get animals to behave if asking nicely doesn't work. The Stare, she called it. I, um, only use it for emergencies."

Discord grinned as he reached out to cup her chin. She leaned the rest of the way so that she would touch him first.

"You are simply full of surprises, my dear."

She sighed happily and closed her eyes as his paw caressed her face.

"Now it's *my* turn to surprise *you* ."

She opened her eyes. "What is it, what is it?"

He laughed at how much she sounded like a filly about to get a new toy.

"I hope you had a light dinner," he said as he brought a picnic basket into view. "We stay inside so much. I thought we could have a little midnight snack under the stars. Pinkie packed it for us. And there's a full moon out tonight. What do you say?"

"Oh, it sounds *lovely* !" Fluttershy said in awe.

"Then come on out! I know the perfect place!"

She frowned when he took off. When he realized she wasn't following him, he returned with a befuddled look.

"Something wrong?"

"Y-Yes," she muttered. "Y-You see, I can't…" She looked shamefully back at her wings. "I can't…"

His eyes widened in understanding. "You can't fly?"

She hid her face in her hooves.

"Hey, hey, it's alright. Though…aren't you a pegasus?"

She sniffed and nodded. "I flew a little when my parents were alive, but…when my aunt took me in, she refused to find some pony to teach me. She said…it was improper for a young lady to fly. So…I never learned and…my wings just haven't had enough practice so… they never really strengthened and…"

"Hey, hey! Don't—OUCH!"

He had reached out to touch her, but was prevented by an electric shock. Fluttershy quietly gave him permission and he tried again, gently taking her hooves and lowering them from her tear-stained face.

"It's alright. You don't have to fly." He grinned impishly as a thought occurred to him. "You can just ride on my back."

"W-What?" she gasped.

He turned around and stuck out his back. "Hop on!"

"Oh, but…it'll be so high and…"

He sighed in exasperation. "You're afraid of heights, aren't you?"

She nodded hastily.

"Of course you are." He looked at her sincerely. "As long as you are with me, Fluttershy, you will not fall."

There was no reason to distrust him, as he had so far held to his word. He stretched out his paw and she allowed him to help her onto his back. She gripped her hooves around his neck and nestled between his mismatched wings.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

"Mmm-hmm," she nodded.

"Then hold on tight!"

With a whoosh, he shot into the air and Fluttershy reacted with a scream. She shut her eyes firmly, not daring to open them as she felt the cold wind sting her face and blow through her mane. She buried her muzzle in the fur of Discord's neck as she tightened her grip.

"It really isn't that bad, you know?" he called back to her.

Her only response was a whimper much like a kitten's. Discord rolled his eyes.

"Fine, if you insist on missing out on this spectacular view! We're almost there anyway."

She squeaked as he whizzed off again. Much to her relief, it felt like they were flying lower. Soon he came to a stop and he helped Fluttershy down, but she still kept her eyes closed.

"You can look now," he assured her.

Slowly, her eyelids lifted, but when she looked down the ground was several kilometers below. She squeaked and turned back into

Discord's arms.

"I thought we were on the ground!"

"We are," he said. "Sort of. Actually, we're on a mountain cliff…"

" *Mountain* ?!"

"The view is really quite spectacular from up here! If you would just take a good long look…"

"No!" she screamed, shaking her head furiously.

She pulled his cape around her and tried to hide as best as possible. He chuckled at her behavior and carefully led her back into the open. She tried to conceal herself again but he quickly grabbed her by the shoulders and spun her around to face the chasm. Her hooves immediately flew to her eyes. He sighed and dropped to one knee.

"You're being ridiculous, you know?"

"It's too high," she whimpered, shaking her head. "Too high."

"But you won't fall."

"Take me someplace closer to the ground!"

"But you'll miss out on such a wonderful sight!"

"I don't care!"

"One little peek and *then* tell me if you want to go somewhere else. Don't you trust me, Fluttershy?"

"Of course I do."

"Then trust me when I say that it'll be worth it."

She was still for a moment. "I'm afraid."

He smiled as he firmed his grasp on her shoulders, but not too much to harm her.

"There's no need for you to be," he whispered in her ear. "I'm here."

She wanted to believe him. His touch was so reassuring, and she was certain he wouldn't let her fall to her death. Unhurriedly, she lowered her hooves and opened her eyes. The steep abyss made her head spin and she began backing away, but Discord prevented her. Then he gently placed his talon under her chin and lifted her head up. What she saw made her gasp in wonder.

She could see the forest for acres, and past that, the tiny lights of Zebiu. And beyond that, a dark horizon that promised adventure and mystery. The full moon made everything so clear, and she could see the advantage of being up so high.

"It's beautiful," she uttered.

"Indeed," Discord murmured, his gaze fixated on Fluttershy. "Beautiful."

"I…I never knew the world was so… *big* !"

He chuckled. "It's much bigger than that. You see those mountains to the east?"

Fluttershy nodded at where he was pointing.

"Beyond them lies Brayşov. To the south lies the Aegeing Sea. And in between, you'll find Bullarest."

"Oh my," she breathed.

He pretended to frown. "This must be making you dizzy. Oh well, if you'd rather dine someplace else…"

"No! I-I like it! It's…perfect."

He smiled and brought out the picnic basket. "Then let's eat, shall we?"

Snapping his fingers, he summoned a blanket that was sprawled over the rocky cliff. Fluttershy sat down as he set the picnic basket between them. One by one, its contents floated into the air.

"Let's see," Discord said as he worked his magic. "We've got bread, some cheese—I hope you like brie—also apples…"

Fluttershy frowned as a bottle of red liquid hovered in front of her. "Oh, I don't drink wine."

He bit his lip as he took the bottle in his claw. "It's, um, not wine."

She glanced at the bottle again and uttered, "Oh."

"You don't, err, mind, do you? Pinkie just thought it strange that you should be eating while I'm…"

"No, go ahead. Just…don't tell me what it's from."

Discord smiled as he popped the bottle open and began chugging down the blood. Using a knife, Fluttershy sliced the bread and cheese and ate them in little sandwiches, taking occasional bites from an apple.

"Why didn't you tell me you couldn't fly before?" Discord finally asked as he wiped some blood off his mouth. "Come to think of it, I don't know that much about you. At least where your past is concerned. I know your parents died when you were young and you were brought up by your aunt, but other than that, nothing."

Fluttershy lowered her apple and sighed sadly. "I suppose I should tell you. After all, I know about your past. It's just…I don't like talking about it much."

He scooted closer to her. "You can tell me. I'm all ears."

To her surprise, both his ears popped off and wiggled in the air. Smiling, she took a deep breath.

"I…didn't always live like this, you know? I wasn't rich, I mean. My mother…married below her station. My father was a farmer. Despite her family's wishes, Mother ran off to marry him and they soon had me. We had a nice little farm. We grew all sorts of things: barley, wheat, potatoes, beats, sunflowers."

She sighed dreamily at the memory. "Oh, I loved the sunflowers

especially. They were so tall, always looking in different directions. We also kept a lot of livestock: chickens, cows, pigs, sheep, even bunny rabbits. I always loved bunny rabbits. Father tended the crops while Mother took care of the animals."

"And that's what made you so interested in plants and animals," Discord guessed.

She nodded. "They were both so nurturing, Mother especially. At night, she would sing and brush my mane with her hoof until I fell asleep." She frowned suddenly. "We were all so excited when she became pregnant again. Father had built a new crib and everything, and I couldn't wait for my new brother or sister to arrive. But…"

She couldn't go on. She didn't have to, for Discord had already heard this part of the story.

"And then your father got sick," he finished.

Her hoof moved to wipe away a tear. "Aunt Starlight heard the news. Even though my father was lowborn, I was still of her blood, she said. Her husband died before she could have children of her own. I would've ended up in the orphanage or on the street had she not taken me in."

She began sobbing and Discord reached out to take her in his arms, but flinched at knowing what would happen. Seeing his outstretched arms, she nestled into his embrace and allowed him to wrap his cape around her, shielding her from misery.

"I *wanted* to fly, you know?" she sniffed. "Father, who was the pegasus, started teaching me, before he…"

"Shhh," Discord whispered, patting her back. "There, there. At least you got to know your parents, and shared happy times with them."

Pulling away, she smiled up at him. "It's been so long since I've talked about them with anyone. Auntie never lets me."

"How that snobby little witch can ever be related to a mare as sweet and good as you is beyond me."

"That's a cruel thing to say! You hardly know her!"

"No, but I've *met* her, remember?"

"Well, maybe if you hadn't hypnotized her so much, you would know her better."

It was meant to be a scolding, but her expression was revealingly coy that it made him laugh. Soon she began chuckling along with him. Before they knew it, they were laughing so hard that they both toppled over. Instead of rising, they decided to take the opportunity to view the night sky. Out here, without all the city lights interfering, the stars had never looked brighter to Fluttershy. Discord kept his attention on her and how the astral and lunar light illuminated her enchanting features.

"They're so lovely," she murmured.

"Yes," he sighed dreamily.

"How far do you suppose they are?"

"Hmm?" He snapped back to reality. "Oh, the stars! Millions of kilometers away, I imagine."

"Do you think you can fly up there?"

"Oh, no. I tried once, but it nearly killed me. Too much sun exposure." He rolled onto his side. "But if I could, I would fly up and grab one of those stars for you."

Grinning up at him, she raised her hoof and caressed his cheek, making him groan in pleasure.

"That's very sweet of you to say, but I don't need any stars."

"Then what *can* I do for you?"

She blushed deeply. "It's enough just to be with you, to be able to talk to you, to l—"

Discord stiffened, and Fluttershy glanced sideways in

embarrassment.

"A-Are you saying what I," he stammered, " *think* you're saying?"

She was pondering on the question. This past month with him had been wonderful. He was such good company, easy to talk to, and never failed to make her laugh or smile. And now, he had helped her overcome her fear of heights. She felt safe with him, secure. As she looked at him now, she didn't see a murderous vampire, but a kind and gentle creature who adored her with all his heart. How else would she feel about him?

"Y-Yes," she said confidently. "I love you, Discord."

If his heart wasn't dead already, it would've stopped and burst out of his chest at that very instant. The corners of his mouth turned up in a way that his face pinched, but he didn't care. There were no words to describe how happy he felt. At last, the love of his life had said the very words he had been dying to hear.

Which meant their wedding day couldn't be too far off.

"Permission to kiss you passionately?"

She giggled. "Granted, though I don't think there's any need for you to ask anymore."

"Do I have your word on that?" he asked, wriggling his eyebrows.

"Yes, I…"

His lips were on hers before she could finish. Snaking her hooves around his neck, she accepted his kiss. He was so overjoyed, his mouth moved eagerly from her lips, to her cheek, to her neck. Fluttershy moaned in pleasure. Every moment with him was exciting and pleasant. She truly couldn't imagine doing this with anyone else. She also felt free and rebellious, knowing her aunt would never approve.

That reminded her of something else.

"Oh, Discord!"

"Hmm?" Discord moaned against her throat.

"I just remembered! Aunt Starlight and I were invited to a dinner party with Lord Fancy Pants tomorrow night."

"Fancy Pants?" He stopped what he was doing and straightened up, much to both of their disappointment. "Rarity mentioned him earlier. She met him last night, and apparently he's her soulmate."

"Rarity and Fancy Pants?" Fluttershy said, sitting up in surprise. "Hmm. Now that I think about it, they both seem to have a refined taste. My aunt tried to set him up as a suitor for me, but he saw that my heart belonged to another."

Discord's eyebrows shot up. "You told him about us?"

"Not the details," she said with a blush. "Just that you wanted to marry me and, while I didn't quite know it yet, I was developing feelings for you. Fancy Pants was very kind about it. I can see why Rarity likes him."

"Good," he sighed, looking back up at the stars. "If Rarity's going to have any stallion in her life, I'm glad it's a good one. After Tenderheart, I don't think she could stand another betrayal."

"Oh, I'm sure Fancy Pants won't do a thing like that. Anyway, Auntie wanted me to ensure that you'd be coming to the party too."

He smacked his forehead. "I forgot about that! Rarity apparently got herself *and* me invited to that dinner party!"

"So you'll be there?"

He bit his lip. "It'll be hard to keep up the act for so long…"

"We can make it work," she insisted, taking his paw. "Please come. I would feel much more comfortable with you there."

Once again, he could not resist her pleading, innocent eyes. Finally, he sighed in defeat.

"If it'll please you, I'll come." He grinned slyly at her. "So exactly how

long have you had feelings for me?"

She gulped at the way he was looking at her. "W-Well I…I don't know, but…while you were away, I…I guess that's when I started…"

She trailed off as his tail wrapped around her and brought her closer to his body. Fluttershy was struck dumb as she found herself locked in his smoldering gaze once again. Her breathing staggered as his claw weaved into her mane and he smiled in amazement at her beauty.

"I loved you from the moment I saw you," he purred, "but it's grown more and more with each passing day. You're not only beautiful. You're kind, passionate, caring," he bent down to whisper in her ear, "and a *very* good kisser."

She gasped in ecstasy as his lips returned to her neck. It was a sensitive area, they both knew, for at any moment he could spring his fangs and do the inevitable. Fluttershy was willing to take that risk, for like he said. There was no reason to be afraid as long as he was holding her.

Brayşov = Braşov, another charming city in Romania

Aegeing Sea = Aegean Sea; a play on the term "aging" which means to tell a horse's age by looking in its mouth (I had to do some digging for this pun)

I tried SO HARD not to make this too much like Chapter 13 of "Bride of Discord."

Sleeping Pains

I wasn't able to write due to an excruciating long-lasting headache. Hard to concentrate when the back of your head is screaming. Fortunately, the doctor said it wasn't serious and was probably due to lack of sleep or too much time on the computer. He might be right.

"What do you mean you're not coming to the dinner party?!" Sunset shouted, sitting up furiously in bed.

The stallion who lay naked beside her shrugged. "It's a feeding night for me, and all that rich food's bad for my digestion."

She groaned as she pushed herself up from the mattress and stomped over to the screen, collecting pieces of her clothing with her magic along the way. Trenderhoof rolled his eyes as he rose and began dressing himself.

"Every time I share something with you…"

"Don't even start!" Sunset hollered.

"I *need* to feed."

"So do I!"

"I'll bring some pony back for you."

"Don't bother! I'll find some pony at the party!"

"Now, Sunset! Remember we have to be careful when dealing with the rich and powerful. Draws too much attention to ourselves."

Sunset glared at him as she stepped out, magically weaving the laces of her corset.

"I hate these things," she grumbled. "Even if I don't have to breathe,

it's just uncomfortable!"

She grunted as she tugged at the laces.

"You've been awfully tense lately, darling," Trenderhoof noted as he slid on his trousers. "I really thought that last round would've loosened you up a bit."

"Well, it didn't," she huffed as she scoured the floor for her stockings.

"Hmm," he pondered. "It couldn't have been *my* performance."

"Shut up. I *still* don't see why you can't wait until *after* the party to feed!"

"You've all seen the local vampires. It's time I got a glimpse of them myself."

"But the Count will be at the dinner."

"And that's where you come in, my dear. Observe him. Watch for any signs that he may be a vampire. See if you can catch his scent. Oh, that's right. You can't. Well, then I suppose Bulk will just have to escort you."

"Bulk?" Sunset groaned. "You're sending the *dog* to supervise me?"

"His sense of smell is better than any of ours."

"I don't see why you can't just come and see him yourself."

"I'm going to scout the mansion, see if I can catch any of our friends feeding or something. Perhaps I can get some *real* information out of them."

He sent her a mocking look, which made her growl as she levitated her dress over her head. Trenderhoof stood and approached her.

"Let me help you with that."

"Don't!" she snapped, holding up a hoof. "I can do it myself!"

He watched her back as the dress fell onto her body and she pulled her fiery mane out of its lacy collar.

"I don't suppose you'd be up for another quick round," he whispered, laying a hoof on her shoulder.

She slapped his hoof away and stormed out of the room. It was just after lunch and the Glimmer household assumed she and Trenderhoof were planning what to wear that evening. As they were allegedly brother and sister, no pony had thought anything of it. In truth, Sunset had needed to ease the tension that had been building up inside her for the past two days.

Ever since her last meeting with Lavender, strange sensations had been stirring within Sunset. It seemed she was growing more and more agitated with every passing second. For what, she had no idea, but it happened most when she was with Trenderhoof. Every little thing he did made her insides stiffen. Just the slight brush of the hoof would cause her brain to rattle and ring. While he had always gotten on her nerves, it had come to a point where she was furious at Trenderhoof for simply existing.

Bedding him was supposed to remind her that this was her mate, her true love, the stallion she had given her life to. All that did was make the tension worse. Her loins were so cramped she could barely move her back legs without wincing. Making love to Trenderhoof had just seemed…pointless, disgusting. Even now as she was stomping through the hallway, she was repulsed with herself.

Why was she feeling this way? And why was it every time she was with Trenderhoof, that lavender unicorn would pop into her head?

Her mind was so muddled. It needed to be calmed in the one place she could feel comfortable. It didn't take her long to find the mansion's library, as Lady Starlight had shown it to her on her first day. She was disappointed with how small it was, but there were enough books present to reassure her into a sense of tranquility. Spotting one of her favorite titles, she levitated it off the shelf and began skimming through.

Had Lavender read this book too? Sunset figured she had. That mare was quite intelligent, so no doubt she would indulge in heavy reading. Did that enormous castle have a library? What other books would she be reading? She had to have gotten her deductive reasoning skills from somewhere. Perhaps she owned numerous spell books. Sunset would certainly have to be on her guard next time she…

"Sunset?"

With a start, she dropped her book as she turned to the intruder. Fluttershy was staring curiously at her.

"What are you doing in here?!" Sunset exclaimed.

"Um," Fluttershy uttered. "This is sort of my house? What are *you* doing in here?"

"What? I can't come into an empty library for some much-needed privacy? I mean this place is perfect for privacy! It's big— *ish* , no pony's here, I get alone time!"

Fluttershy knelt down to pick up the large book Sunset had dropped. Her eyes widened in surprise as she read the title.

" *War and Peace* ?"

Sunset slammed the book closed with her magic and thrust it onto the shelf. "I just like to look at the pictures! There…weren't that many. It was pretty dull and, uh…really, really, *really* hard to read."

Fluttershy cocked her head. "Sunset, if you like to read, there's nothing to be…"

"Read?!" she scoffed. "Don't be silly! I don't *read* ! Certainly not for *fun* !"

"But it's alright if you…"

"Oh, go play with your dolls or something!"

Fluttershy jumped as Sunset pushed past her, fuming at the nostrils.

She glanced at the thick book on the shelf and wondered what had set the unicorn off.

Because he had to wait until after sunset before changing into his bat form, by the time Trenderhoof had gotten to the castle, Count Discord's coach was already on its way. Since it was long past seven, he wondered why Discord was running so late. Even if he was a vampire, he didn't have to fear the sun as long as he was in pony form.

There was no point in following the carriage, for Trenderhoof already knew where it was headed. Besides, contrary to what he had told Sunset, Count Discord wasn't his main objective. It was his servants he was more interested in, or rather one in particular. The moment he had heard her name, he knew it couldn't be a coincidence. It wasn't a common name, and he had last seen her on the outskirts of Zebiu. But he had presumed her dead all this time, or had she escaped the beast? He had to be sure it was her.

Sunset had been right about the castle. There weren't many windows and they were all drawn. There were two on either side of the front door and four on the second floor. Then he came to the east side of the house and spotted one lone window smack in the center of the wall. Through the curtains he could see a light. Drawing closer, he pressed his ear to the glass and could make out two voices. One was shrill yet masculine, possibly belonging to a young colt. The other was deep, but feminine. They were talking over each other so quickly that he couldn't make out the conversation.

"…sun's hardly…"

"…need rest…"

"…not a baby…"

"…others are out…"

"…not sleepy…"

"…opportunity for you to…"

"Not sleepy!" the youth shouted over her. From the squeaks Trenderhoof supposed he was jumping on a bed. "Not sleepy, not sleepy, not sleepy, not sleep…"

"Spike, if ya don't go to bed now, I'm not givin' ya anymore after-dinner gems!"

The squeaking ceased and the youth let out a sigh. The shifting noises suggested he was obeying his nurse. At least, that's what Trenderhoof supposed the situation was. The boy couldn't be more than twelve. What was a child doing at Count Discord's residence? He had heard nothing of the Count having a son, or nephew, or ward of any sorts. Or maybe he was the son of one of the servants, and the mare was his mother.

This theory was dashed when they spoke again.

"If you're gonna baby me like this, Applejack, can you at least tell me a bedtime story?"

"I thought you were too grown-up."

"Well not for *stories* . Look at Twilight!"

The mare chuckled. "Only for you, Spike."

Trenderhoof's ears twitched at the mare's voice. There was no mistaking that rich country accent, that deep, throaty chuckle. And the youth, Spike, had called her Applejack.

"Hey!"

Trenderhoof jumped and spun around to see a lavender vampire bat flapping towards him. From her horn, he supposed she was the unicorn Sunset had run into.

"What are you doing here?"

To avoid interrogation, Trenderhoof whizzed into the sky before the lavender mare could get a good look at him. He didn't need to linger

any longer anyway. He'd learned what he had needed to know.

Inside, Applejack was tucking Spike into bed. Since Discord and Rarity were out, Pinkie and Rainbow had gone to the tavern and Twilight was searching again for members of the foreign vampire coven, Applejack was left to watch over Spike. She felt compelled to now that there was a new threat outside. She admitted it was kind of silly putting him to bed so early like a little foal, but he'd been working so hard lately, having to stay up at night with the rest of them while also fulfilling his daily chores. At least he didn't mind her bedtime stories. They were truly her favorite part.

"So which story do ya wanna hear?" she asked him.

"Tell the one about the Sleeping Beauty! You know, the *better* version!"

She grinned, knowing she had modified that story just for him. "Alright. Once upon a time, there was a brave and noble…"

"Don't forget ruggedly handsome!" Spike interjected, flexing his arms. "With big strong muscles!"

She giggled. "There was a brave, noble, ruggedly handsome dragon knight, with big strong muscles. And he was on a quest to rescue a beautiful princess who had been imprisoned in a tower by an evil prince."

"Prince Trippyheel!" Spike spat in disgust.

"The prince was handsome, but he had a heart as cold as ice…"

"And an ego bigger than his head!"

"And he'd use that ego and handsomeness to woo young mares, who all fell prey to his good looks."

"Except for the beautiful princess!"

Applejack smiled. "That's right. The prince wanted to marry her for her kingdom and riches, but she wouldn't have him."

"Because he was a jerk!"

"And a downright pig! The prince, furious, locked her away in a tower where she would stay until she accepted his proposal, but she still refused him."

"Might've had something to do with locking her in a tower."

"He decided if he couldn't have her, no one could, so he cast a spell putting her in a deep sleep, only to be awakened by a kiss from her true love."

"And that was the dragon knight!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, Sugar. Meanwhile, the dragon knight, who had heard legend of the Sleeping Beauty, went searching for her. He crossed stormy seas, tracked through the driest of deserts, ventured through the darkest of forests until he came to the tower where his princess awaited him. With one swift punch, he broke the front door down and raced up the stairs."

"But the prince was waiting for him too!"

"With a sword!"

"Hyaw!" Spike cried out as he jumped up and waved about a wooden stake, which he had pulled out from under his pillow.

Applejack jumped back in alarm. "Careful with that, Spike! That could actually hurt me, remember?"

"Oh. Sorry! Here, you be the prince!"

He reached under his pillow again and tossed her another stake. Rolling her eyes, Applejack climbed onto the bed on her knees and began clashing her stake with his.

"You shall not prevail, foul beast! The princess is mine!" she cackled, taking on a posh accent.

"No, she is mine!" Spike rebuked, sounding as bold as he possibly could. "Once I wake her, I will not treat her like a slave and lock her

in a tower! I will treat her like the queen she is!"

"No, she shall not! I'm gonna play dirty and use my magic on ya!"

She placed the stake on her head to resemble a horn and made a "*Pew* !" sound. Spike dodged the imaginary blast.

"Ha-ha!" he exclaimed. "You missed! Your magic is no match for my fire breath!"

As the dragon took a deep breath, Applejack ducked for cover. But Spike only released a small blow and laughed.

"You didn't think I was gonna *really* breathe fire, did you?"

Applejack narrowed her eyes with a smirk. "Alright, smarty! Take that!"

She jabbed at him, but he parried. They laughed as they continued their pretend duel.

"Then just when it seemed like all hope was lost," Spike narrated, "our hero plunged his sword into the prince's heart, turning him to dust!"

Applejack cried in mock agony as he stabbed his stake under her foreleg.

"Oh, the pain!" she wailed, gripping the weapon as she slowly crumpled onto the bed. "Curse you, mighty dragon!"

She stuck out her tongue and fell limp. After a moment, she jumped back up and threw the stake aside.

"Having vanquished his greatest enemy," she continued, "the brave dragon marched up the rest of the stone steps and at the top, lying in a gorgeous canopy bed, was the Sleeping Beauty."

"And she was," Spike yawned as he sat down, "more beautiful than he could've ever imagined."

Seeing his fatigue, she scooted beside him and allowed his head to

loll onto her chest. "You wanna tell me just how beautiful she was?"

He nodded. "Her fur was as white as pearl, her hair like amethyst… so curly…"

She tried her best to hide her frown as she continued the story. "He almost didn't wanna wake her, for she looked so peaceful, but he had come all this way to free her. So he leaned down and gently placed his lips on hers. When he pulled away, her eyes opened."

"Sapphire eyes…" he sighed as his own eyelids began to droop.

"Right," she gulped. "And the moment they saw each other, they knew that they were meant to be together, and felt like they had always known. And so they were married…"

"And lived," Spike yawned and stretched before curling up against her body, "happily…ever…after."

A second later he was snoring soundly in her lap. Smiling sadly, she stroked the spines on his head. It was tempting to leave a small kiss on them, but she would never do that without permission.

She wanted to stay with him like this forever, but her heart ached knowing that it mustn't happen. It took all her willpower to slowly pull away, cradling his head until it was safe on his pillow. Gently, she pulled out the covers from under his legs and then up over his body. With one last tender caress, she stepped away from the bed and blew out the candle on the dresser. She took her time as she backed into the doorway, her gaze locked on the dragon as she whispered the rest of the story.

"But the dragon knight, as brave and noble as he was, had been tricked, for he had kissed the wrong princess, set there as a decoy by the evil prince. Little did our hero know that his real princess had been in the next room, waiting for him to wake her. But he would never come, for he had no idea she was waiting."

She sighed sadly as she placed her hoof on the doorknob. "But it was probably for the best. The princess didn't want to be awakened anyway."

Closing the door, she muttered, "She just wanted to keep on sleeping."

Short, I know. But I want the next chapter to focus on the dinner party.

I didn't realize the many meanings the *Sleeping Beauty* story could have until I wrote this.

High Society

I wasn't kidding about the headaches. They made it hard to concentrate. Not to mention with my grandma moving in this summer the house has been in a frenzy. It's a relief to be able to sit down and write again.

As was often the case at these high society dinner parties, Fluttershy was bored out of her mind, but did her best not to show it. There were at least a dozen ponies aside from herself, her aunt, Fancy Pants, Sunset and her enormous lackey, who was standing dutifully behind his mistress. Three seats were empty, two across from Fluttershy for Trenderhoof and a "special guest," whom she assumed to be Rarity. The third stood in between Fluttershy and Fancy Pants at the head of the table, reserved for Discord.

Starlight was chattering away with the other noble ponies and business stallions. With a glance at Sunset, Fluttershy could tell she wasn't the only one there uninterested in their talk of fashion and politics. At least Trenderhoof was at a business dinner and not there to court her.

When the second course was taken away, Fluttershy glanced anxiously at the empty seat beside her. She'd told Fancy Pants to start the dinner without Discord, knowing he wouldn't want the food anyway and that he had to wait until the sun was completely set. She just wished he'd hurry up already. She needed some pony to talk to through all this tiresome chatter.

"Lord Jet Set," Starlight addressed the gray unicorn with a black mane beside her, "I hear you and Lady Upper Crust were recently in Moscow!"

"Indeed we were," replied Lady Upper Crust, the yellow unicorn who sat with Jet Set. "And we even had the pleasure of dining with the Tsar and his family."

"Nice fellow," Jet Set said nonchalantly. "Charming children too."

"Glad to hear that," Starlight grinned as she sipped her wine. "I've heard dreadful rumors that Moscow isn't doing so well financially."

"Oh, just talk from those politically fanatic peasants."

Upper Crust grunted in annoyance. "Unfortunately we were unable to avoid the riffraff. They kept coming at us, waving flyers and talking about how every pony should be equal no matter what their status or upbringing or species!"

"Really?" Starlight lowered her glass and leaned forward in interest. "And how do they hope to accomplish that?"

"By abolishing the class system!" Jet Set scoffed. "Can you imagine?"

A few guests let out droll laughter, including Starlight. But Fluttershy could've sworn her aunt's laugh sounded hesitant and forced.

Just then, Fancy Pants' butler entered the room and cleared his throat. "The Count Discord and Domnişoară Rarity, sir."

All heads turned, anxious to get a look at the mysterious count. Fluttershy and Fancy Pants simultaneously stood, which Sunset noticed out of the corner of her eye as she straightened up to see the incoming guests. Truly, she was curious to see what this count was like, to lock himself in his mansion all day and rarely emerge. Was he hideous, or just socially awkward?

She and every pony else, with the exception of Starlight and Fluttershy, gaped in surprise as a handsome gray unicorn with a short but well-coiffed black mane entered with a fair white unicorn at his side. He smiled as his red eyes looked to the shocked ponies.

" *Bună seara* , every pony!" he greeted cheerfully. "So good to see you all on this glorious evening!" He locked gaze with Fluttershy and muttered, "Some more than others."

Fluttershy blushed and gave him a small smile.

"Count Discord!" Fancy Pants exclaimed. "I didn't think you were coming!"

"Previous engagement," Discord said, waving his hoof as he came up to the empty seat next to Fluttershy. "Too important, couldn't cancel, yada, yada, you know how it is."

"Yes, I understand." The host grinned at Rarity. "And I am so glad you were able to make it too, domnişoară. Come, take the seat next to mine."

Rarity put her hoof over her heart as he used his magic to pull out the chair for her. Her giddiness increased as he pushed it back in once she was seated. Sunset cocked her head curiously at her.

"And who are you?"

"Oh, I'm…" Rarity started to say.

"My cousin," Discord said quickly. "My cousin, Rarity."

"I was not aware you had a cousin," Starlight said suspiciously, squinting at the white unicorn mare. "Though you do look familiar."

Rarity bit her lip nervously. It seemed Starlight's shallowness had caused her to forget her for now, but should she remember Rarity and call her out on her true status, she would be humiliated in front of all these ponies.

"You, uh," Rarity stammered, "might've seen me around town."

"She's been staying with me," Discord explained.

"Yes," Fancy said, sitting down. "And I invited them both." He turned to Discord. "We just started the second course, but if you would like…"

"Oh, no thank you. We ate at our previous engagement."

"We don't wish to be rude, but…" Rarity said rapidly.

"That's quite alright," Fancy said with a grin particularly aimed at her.

"At least we have the honor of being graced with your presence."

Sunset watched the two newcomers steadily. The fact that they refused to eat further confirmed her suspicions that they were vampires too. They weren't clever enough to eat a little and then excuse themselves before their stomachs complained. Sunset took a whiff of the air, but with so many different smells in the room from the ponies to the food, it was hard to pinpoint the ones belonging to the Count and his cousin. The best she could pick up was an unflattering amount of perfume on the mare two seats away from her. Glancing back at Bulk Biceps, she wondered if he was having better luck.

"I see we aren't the only ones tardy," Rarity said, glancing at the empty chair beside her.

"That was reserved for Count Trenderhoof," Fancy Pants explained.

"Oh, yes!" Discord exclaimed, turning to Fluttershy. "Isn't that the fellow staying at your home?"

"Yes, while he's here on business," Starlight said before her niece could open her mouth. She pointed across the table. "This here is his sister, the Lady Sunset Shimmer."

"Oh, pleasure to meet you!" Rarity chimed, extending her hoof across the empty seat.

"Charmed," Sunset grunted, turning away from her.

Rarity felt insulted but she kept up a smile to be polite. However, when she retracted her hoof, something caught her nostrils. The scent made her stiffen and her blood drop to an even colder temperature. It was a pleasant smell, like a stallion's cologne mixed with perspiration, but the familiarity of it made it most unpleasant. She glanced frantically around the room, searching for its source.

"Are you alright, domnişoară?" Fancy asked in concern.

Rarity flashed a grin at him. "Oh, yes! I was just…admiring the décor! That tessellated flower pattern on the wall is Prench, is it not?"

"Indeed it is!" Fancy replied, glancing at the blue wallpaper in question. "I see you were not exaggerating on your knowledge of décor as well as in fashion."

"You are into fashion, Domnişoară Rarity?" Lady Upper Crust asked. "You simply *must* tell me where you got that gorgeous gown of yours then! I should like one myself."

"Oh," Rarity said, glancing down at her mauve dress with a lacey trim. "Actually I…made it myself."

Every pony turned to her in appalment.

"You *make* your *own* clothes?" Upper Crust inquired, scrunching her muzzle.

Rarity bit her lip nervously. Fortunately, Fancy Pants was there to save her.

"And very well, I must say. I think every young mare should have a productive hobby, don't you?"

Many of the guests were shocked, but having no intention to displease their host they nodded and murmured in agreement. Rarity whispered her gratitude to the lord who sent her a wink.

Had Discord not been preoccupied with his ladylove, he might've done something similar in his friend's defense. Fluttershy knew he was eager to be alone with her again, as she could feel his gaze on her, not to mention his back hoof was brushing with hers beneath the table. It was her fault for touching him first.

It's not that she wasn't pleased to see Discord, but now that he was here, looking like some pony else entirely, she felt extremely uncomfortable. She kept telling herself that this was her secret lover, but every time she looked at him it was like seeing a stranger. Eventually she had to pull her hoof away so he could not reach it, which made him frown in disappointment.

"So are the rumors true, Count Discord?" an earth stallion named Hoity Toity questioned. "Are you and Lady Fluttershy betrothed?"

"What?!" Discord, Fluttershy and Starlight uttered all at once.

"Of course not!" Starlight laughed.

Hoity Toity raised an eyebrow. "But you had just told me the other day that…"

"Never mind what I said!"

"Ahem!" Discord coughed. "It is true that Lady Fluttershy and I have been spending a great deal of time together, but I assure you no arrangements have been made for a wedding as of yet."

"But I heard from Lady Starlight that you had proposed to her niece," Hoity Toity explained.

Discord glanced sideways at Fluttershy, who was staring at her hooves, trying to hide the redness in her cheeks. He didn't want to embarrass her in front of all these ponies, but he didn't want to lie either. Of course, honesty wasn't his best quality, but his love for Fluttershy was something he could not lie about. He was aware that as a young, rich, beautiful noblemare she was a desirable bride and he wanted to make it clear that she was his and his alone.

Did that make him sound possessive? Perhaps, but it was true. She was his and he was hers, exclusive only to each other. No matter what their position now, that wasn't going to change, but was that something to say in public?

"I, uh…" he stammered. "We…"

"Yes, it's true."

All eyes turned to Fluttershy, including Discord's. Many were surprised at hearing her voice, as she hardly ever spoke at these occasions. All were shocked at what she had said.

"Discord and I did discuss marriage at one point," Fluttershy said, choosing her words carefully, "but we decided that it is not the time for us to make such a commitment, and felt it best to wait when the right moment comes."

There was silence, until Discord smiled and slid his hoof near hers. She reluctantly took it. Starlight's eyes widened, as if they had just made love right in front of her.

"I think you made a wise choice," Fancy Pants said in a chipper voice. "I always thought that even in our station, a mare and stallion should have some familiarity with each other before taking on the challenges of marriage. Don't you all agree?"

The guests silently concurred, though some of them clearly had reservations. When dessert arrived, Sunset watched Fluttershy and Discord with scrutiny. The latter's eyes would not leave the former, and even when their hooves pulled away, they remained close to each other. Every now and then their forelegs would brush, or he would inch his chair further towards her.

What Fancy Pants called "familiarity" was an understatement. These two had been alone together. After all, last time Fluttershy had gone to Discord's home her escorts had abandoned her. Sunset wouldn't be surprised if they had made love already.

What she couldn't figure out was if Discord was a vampire, why hadn't Fluttershy been turned yet? Her heart was still pumping, that much Sunset knew. It was unlikely Fluttershy was just a casual snack. She was nobility, and her death would draw too much attention. Still, when Sunset was first being courted by Trenderhoof, he had waited until the moment they were alone together before changing her.

Perhaps Discord truly intended to marry the mare, but was it for money, as was Trenderhoof's plan, or was it like when Trenderhoof had sired Sunset? From the way Discord was looking at Fluttershy, it was a great possibility.

Sunset could not help but feel a twinge of envy while watching them. She could not remember the last time Trenderhoof had looked at her that way.

After dessert, Fancy Pants led his party into the drawing room for some music and dancing. Fluttershy and Discord settled on a divan to chat.

"Is something the matter?" he asked in concern. "You seem a bit… on edge tonight."

"Sorry," she muttered, glancing down at her lap. "It's not that I'm not pleased to see you, Discord, but…I'm just not used to…well, *this* you."

Discord smirked in understanding. "Do you miss my handsome face?"

She blushed with a small smile. "I know it's silly, but…you just…"

"Tell you what," he said, leaning forward to whisper in her ear. "You'll see my devilish handsomeness later tonight."

"Discord!" she giggled, lightly pushing him away. "Not here!"

"Oh, what's a small scandal compared to the secrets *we* keep?"

Sunset and Bulk Biceps were standing on the other side of the room, watching and listening to the couple closely.

"What do you think?" the lady whispered to her servant. "Does he smell like a vampire?"

Bulk seemed hesitant to answer.

"Well?"

He leaned closer to her. "His 'cousin' is one, for sure, but him…"

"What?"

He bit his lip. "He smells…different. Like he's neither vampire nor mortal."

Sunset looked at him in surprise. "You saying he's something else entirely?"

He shrugged. "I've never smelled anything like him."

She turned back to the couple as they stood up to dance. "But you say the unicorn mare's one, yes?"

"She has a lot of perfume on, but I have no doubt she's a vampire."

Sunset scanned the room. "I don't see her."

"She left the room a few minutes ago."

"Follow her, but stay inconspicuous. I'll keep an eye on the lovebirds."

Bulk nodded and parted from his mistress. He slid out the doorway leading into a narrow hall of portraits. Rarity was staring up at a large one of a slender white unicorn mare with light violet eyes and a luscious pink mane streaked with white. She wore a maroon gown with a matching bonnet and was seated on a white wooden swing suspended by flower garlands from a tree branch.

"Lovely, isn't she?"

Rarity turned with a start and Bulk ducked around the corner as Fancy Pants approached her.

"Oh, Lord Fancy Pants!" she exclaimed. "I didn't see you there."

He smirked. "Was the party too much excitement for you?"

"Err, yes, I…I'm not one for…crowds."

Truthfully, she'd wanted to get away from all the stallions leering at her. It didn't matter if she was mingling with high society. Stallions were stallions.

"Should I leave you alone with my wife then?" Fancy asked.

It was as if her heart had twisted out of place. "Your…your wife?"

He gestured to the portrait. "Meet Lady Fleur de Lis."

"Oh," Rarity grunted, glaring jealously at the portrait. "Well, as you said, she's… *lovely.* " She cleared her throat to conceal her contempt. "I wasn't aware that you were married."

He frowned. "Actually, I'm a widower."

She turned to him apologetically. "Oh. I'm so sorry, I…"

"It's alright," he said, gazing up wistfully at the painted image of his late wife.

Biting her lip guiltily, she followed his gaze. "How did she pass away, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Childbirth," he murmured.

"And…the child?"

He hung his head solemnly.

"I see."

"It wasn't planned, you know? Us meeting. I was in a Marisian café and as I was getting up we just happened to bump into each other." He chuckled to himself. "I've never been a firm believer in love at first sight, but there was certainly something between us."

"So she was Prench?" Rarity inquired, glancing around. "That would explain why you're so particularly fond of the stylings of the Prench."

"Hmm? Oh, the décor."

"That and your suit."

He grinned at her. "As it so happens, Fleur chose the designs for this mansion *and* most of my wardrobe. She always refused to let me go out in public without her inspection."

"Well, she had good taste."

"And a splendid heart, always caring for the less fortunate. In her will she asked that half her dowry be donated to the local orphanage."

Rarity looked at him in surprise. "And you allowed that to happen?"

He shrugged. "What's a few million to me?"

It was an extraordinary confession. Most stallions did not allow their wives to make such wills. Often there was nothing for the mare to

bequeath, as her husband would take ownership of all her possessions upon marriage. So not only did this lord surrender half his fortune to poor, starving orphans, but he had carried out his wife's dying wish. From the sorrowful way he spoke of her, their marriage had certainly been more than a run-of-the-mill business transaction. He must have been a loving and devoted husband.

Rarity shook these thoughts out of her head. Soulmate or not, she could not let her guard down. She could not be sure how much of his words were true. But then again, they were alone together, and while they appeared to be having a moment, he was not advancing. He was a true gentlecolt, a rare find.

Fancy Pants studied Rarity in thought. "You know. You remind me of her."

She looked away in embarrassment. "I, um…thank you, I…"

"I suppose you're wondering why I invited you here tonight."

She nodded. "It has crossed my mind. I mean you know that I'm not rich or of noble birth."

"Yet for some pony who's never been to one of these high society events, you seem to handle yourself well."

"Who said this is my first societal event?" she demanded, snapping her head towards him.

"It isn't?" he said, raising an eyebrow.

Her mouth opened but she stopped herself before words could come out. How could she say she and Discord had done this sort of thing before? Last time had been nearly fifteen years ago. Surely he would question never having seen either of them already.

Fancy shook his head. "Never mind, I won't pry. What I mean to say is that even though your master was originally my intended guest, when I met you, he simply became an excuse for me to see you again. I hope you don't think me…forward, but you were extremely good company the other night, and…well, I…"

Sweat was dripping down his forehead, and nervous stammers were overcoming him. As Rarity watched all the confidence drain from his face, she could feel the iciness surrounding her heart melting away.

When he realized he was staring, Fancy Pants cleared his throat. "Yes, well, we should probably get back to the party. If any pony notices that we're both missing, they might assume…well…"

"Oh," Rarity said, choking out a giggle. "Yes, yes. We wouldn't want to create a scandal."

Neither of them saw Bulk slip back into the room to seek out his mistress. He spotted her being chatted up by an earth stallion.

"You sure you won't join me in a dance, my lady?" he asked again.

Sunset narrowed her eyes at him and gruffly pushed him so that he fell backward to the floor. Before he could cry out distraughtly, Bulk stood defensively beside his mistress and glared his red eyes menacingly at the bloke. Smiling nervously, he hastily crawled away.

"Your timing couldn't be any more perfect," Sunset murmured to her lackey.

"You seemed to be handling yourself fine," Bulk remarked.

"Yeah, well, I was this close to eating him. I hope you found something interesting about the little marshmallow. Lady Fluttershy and the Count have done nothing but make a lovey-dovey spectacle of themselves on the dancefloor."

She gestured to said couple, who were currently twirling in each other's hooves, their gazes locked together. Meanwhile, Fancy Pants and Rarity were cautiously reentering the drawing room, keeping a safe distance from each other. Watching them, Bulk leaned sideways towards his mistress and whispered.

"Turns out she was having a private rendezvous with Lord Fancy Pants."

Sunset's eyebrows shot up. "Don't tell me they…"

"No, they did nothing intimate. Just talked. But listen to this. Apparently Lord Fancy Pants invited her personally, knowing full well that she wasn't nobility, but Count Discord's servant!"

Her jaw dropped. " *No* !"

" *Yeah* !"

Sunset laughed hysterically. "Oh, this is beautiful! We might as well use this to our advantage! If Trenderhoof won't let us have any *real* fun tonight, we can at least get a laugh out of this!"

"You sure you want to do this, Mistress?" Bulk asked shakily. "I mean…you're not exactly nobility either and she's also in hiding. There's no need to…"

"Oh, Bulk, don't be such a puppy! Don't you know the only way you can get ahead in this world is to be a hypocrite? Trust me. This will be a hoot!"

Smirking maliciously, she sauntered over to the nearest noblemare.

"Lady Upper Crust!" Sunset exclaimed, dramatically putting her hoof over her heart. "You will *not* believe what I just heard!"

"What?" Upper Crust asked in interest.

She whispered in her ear, making the lady gasp.

"Now remember," Sunset murmured. "You cannot repeat this to *any pony* ."

"But of course! I'm not some tawdry gossip!"

The first pony she told was her husband, who told another pony and then another pony, until the news reached the ear of Starlight Glimmer, who let out a shriek that turned all heads and stopped those who were dancing.

"I *knew* I had seen her somewhere before!"

Every pony watched in anticipation as Starlight stomped over to

Rarity, who had been conversing with Fancy Pants near the fireplace. One unicorn mare angrily stuck her hoof in the other's chest.

" *You* , domnişoară, are *no* lady!"

"Lady Starlight!" Fancy Pants exclaimed in appalment. "Do you know to whom you are speaking?!"

"I know very well!" Starlight huffed, narrowing her eyes at Rarity. "And to think I didn't recognize you earlier!" She faced the crowd. "This mare is *not* Count Discord's cousin, but his *servant* !"

Every pony gasped.

"It's true! She came to my home with a message *and* was at Count Discord's home dressed as a maid!"

Cries of outrage began flying.

"This is absurd!"

"A scandal!"

"A maid dressing up like a lady!"

"We should call the police!"

"I bet she was trying to seduce one of us wealthy bachelors!"

"What a little whore!"

"I can explain everything!" Discord tried to shout over the masses.

But as her master struggled to be heard, Rarity unwillingly listened to their insults. They made her sick to her stomach, and it took all her willpower to hold back the blood tears forming in her eyes.

Then a strong, defiant voice spoke out, "Silence! All of you!"

All fell silent upon hearing their host. Rarity turned to Fancy Pants in surprise. He was standing tall, a disappointed scowl etching his strong face.

"This is not becoming behavior!"

"I'll say!" Starlight huffed. "That little tramp trying to fool us all…"

"Because *I* asked her to!"

That brought out another gasp from the crowd. Starlight was shocked, Sunset was furious, Fluttershy and Discord were bewildered and Rarity was awed.

"You heard me!" Fancy declared, lifting his chin firmly. "I met Domnişoară Rarity the other night when she and her friend were walking home. I offered to give them a ride and found her to be delightful company. Well, I invited her this evening and insisted she come incognito, knowing none of you would approve. But you know something? This mare, this *maid* , has more decorum, sophistication and personality than any of you! You've all made that perfectly clear to me just now!"

Every pony was struck dumb. Many mouths were open, including Starlight's and Sunset's. Rarity, meanwhile, was staring at the stallion in amazement, her heart swelling with happiness and gratitude.

It was too much for her to bear.

Fancy took a deep breath and put on a chipper smile. "Now, what say we forget this incident and get on with this lovely evening, shall we?"

Not wanting to get into an argument, the ponies did as he said. Fancy grinned down at Rarity, who was just about to let the bloody floodgates loose.

"Sorry about that. Now, you were just telling me about your family…"

She fled from the room without a word, leaving Fancy Pants in confusion.

"Domnişoară Rarity?" he called as he chased after her.

"Think we should follow them?" Fluttershy asked Discord as they

watched Fancy disappear.

"Best to let them alone," Discord replied. "Rarity can handle herself, and you know as well as I do that matters of the heart are a private matter."

"What he said about her…it was really beautiful."

"It was. I was about to defend her but it turned out I didn't have to. I'm starting to see why he's the one for her. Rarity needs some pony like him to see her as a mare rather than an object." He shook his head with worry. "I just hope she doesn't let this one slip away."

Rarity found sanctuary out on the terrace, but she wasn't alone for long.

"Domnişoară?" Fancy called, trotting up to her. "What's the matter? Did I do something to offend you?"

She did not turn around, for she did not want him to see the blood staining her white cheeks. "No, you…you did nothing to offend me."

"Then was it what those ponies in there said? I told you, I have no interest in their…"

"Don't!" she screamed suddenly.

He blinked in confusion. "Don't what?"

"Just…don't."

She began wiping her tears with a sniff. A handkerchief appeared floating in front of her. Muttering in thanks, she used it to blow her muzzle.

"What they said to you in there," Fancy said slowly, "was cruel and uncalled for. The worst part is I *knew* they would react that way. I shouldn't have invited you in the first place. I would've spared you the torment."

"It's not your fault," Rarity sobbed. "You've done nothing wrong. In fact, I can't imagine you doing *anything* wrong."

"Whatever do you mean?"

Once she was certain her face was clean, she turned to face him. "You, you're just…just…too wonderful!"

He chuckled throatily. "You are too kind."

"I am serious! You are a big and important pony with strong connections and millions…I don't know how much actually, but clearly a lot of money! I mean look at this mansion! And yet…you invited *me* here! And I'm supposed to be beneath you, yet you treat me as your equal! As if that weren't enough, you gave up half your wife's bequeathal to charity! To *orphans* ! Not to mention this is the second time we've been alone together and not *once* have you taken advantage of it!"

"Dear lady!" he scoffed. "That is the second time you have insinuated that I would…"

"I'm not saying you *would* ! I don't believe you *ever* would, but you *could* ! You…you're a real gentlecolt. You're kind, you're courteous, you're everything I could've ever asked for in a stallion! And I'm…"

She turned her back to him again. "I am unworthy."

Her words must have stunned him, for his voice sounded hoarse. "Rarity…"

"Oh, just listen to me! Here I am pouring my heart out to a stallion I met only yesterday! You must think me silly…"

She gasped as she felt his hoof on her shoulder and she faced him again. His blue eyes were filled with sincerity.

"You are not silly," he said softly. "And you are *not* unworthy. What I said in there, I meant every word. Although we have not known each other for very long, I've never met a mare like you, and I care not about your background…"

"Oh, will you just *stop* being so *wonderful* ?" Rarity whimpered.

His confusion returned. "I do not understand. I am fond of you and you just confessed that you…"

"You don't know me, Fancy! You don't know what I've been through! You don't know what I've…"

She choked up as the images of all the stallions she had slaughtered flashed through her mind. Never once had she felt any guilt or remorse for those horrid acts. Until now.

During her silence, Fancy remembered something she had said yesterday and again a few minutes ago. Seeing her distress and doubt, he began to understand, at least a part of it.

"Some pony hurt you a long time ago, didn't he?"

Amazement overwhelmed her heart and she broke into tears, covering her face to hide their redness.

"There, there," Fancy whispered, tenderly taking her into his hooves. "It's alright."

He was holding her, and once again he wasn't taking advantage of their position. One hoof cradled her head while the other was placed on her back, neither of them exploring. But she could feel their gentle squeezes, assuring her that he cared. Returning his embrace, she cried into his shoulder, not caring if he noticed the blood.

"I, err," he stammered. "I am sorry if this is too…"

"Just be quiet and hold me a while," she croaked. "Please."

He complied with her, and they remained still. Any minute now some pony could come out and spot them, but what did it matter? This moment was theirs.

Discord and Fluttershy were dancing again, but every now and then Discord would lean in for a kiss, only for Fluttershy's hoof to stop

him.

"Discord, not here," she reminded him.

"What, I can't even kiss my ladylove?" he whined, pouting his lip.

"You've really never courted a mare before me, have you?"

"Of course not! Didn't I say *you* were my soulmate? As in, *solely* my mate? And as I recall, *you* haven't had much experience either."

"Yes, but Auntie Starlight taught me the rules. A mare and stallion cannot show any… *physical* affection in public, *especially* if they are not married."

"Then perhaps I should propose again in front of all these witnesses."

"Discord!"

"Well, they're expecting it."

She laughed. "You're impossible."

He smirked. "And you're so irresistible that it's *killing* me not being able to touch you."

"You're touching me right now."

"You *know* what I mean."

" *Later* ," she hissed through her teeth.

"Ah!" Discord cried out, stopping the dance to clutch his cranium.

Fluttershy rolled her eyes. "Alright, there's no need to be dramatic."

"No!" he whispered, leaning in closer. "That's my brain telling me my hour's almost up!"

She put her hoof to her mouth. "Oh dear. How long do you have?"

"About five minutes. Maybe less. I have to go *now* ."

"I'll still see you later, won't I?"

He smiled. "Nothing can keep me away from you, my dar—OW!"

Ponies turned to him in alarm, including Sunset Shimmer, as he staggered across the room, still holding his head.

"It's alright, folks, just a small migraine!"

"Perhaps you should lie down, Count Discord," Starlight said, offering her hoof.

"I'm fine! I just need to go home and rest. Rarity? Rarity! Has any pony seen Rarity?"

Fortunately she and Fancy Pants were just returning from the terrace and once she saw the state her master was in, she rushed to his side.

"Excuse me, Fancy Pants!" she apologized as she swung Discord's foreleg around her neck for support. "I must get the Count home at once! He's having one of his terrible headaches!"

"Yes, yes, of course," Fancy replied.

"Thank you for the lovely evening!" she called as she dragged her master down the hall.

Sunset was befuddled by this spectacle. This behavior was strange, even for vampires. She had never heard of them having headaches. Sure, Trenderhoof sometimes made her so furious to the point where her skull exploded, but never did she experience sudden unexplained migraines. Determined to get to the bottom of this, she pushed past the posh ponies and chased after them.

"We have to hurry!" Discord exclaimed as he felt his unicorn horn grow and twist. "I don't know if I can hold this much longer!"

"We're almost at the door, Master!" Rarity assured him. "Just a little…"

"Excuse me!"

"Ugh, what now?" he growled.

"Count Discord!"

Rarity glanced over her shoulder. "It's the Lady…Sunshine Simmer or something like that."

"If I could just have a moment of your time!"

"Distract her!" Discord hissed, releasing his servant and lowering his head. "I can make it out the door myself!"

Rarity nodded and stood in front of him so Sunset wouldn't see his tail solidifying into that of a snake's.

"May I help you?" Rarity chirped, putting on a strained smile.

"I'd like to speak with the Count," Sunset said.

She tried to look over the white mare's shoulder, but Rarity moved to block her view.

"He is unwell and is not in the mood to socialize."

"But I merely want to…"

Sunset stepped to the side but Rarity followed her.

"If you will just let me…"

No matter what steps she took to get around her, Rarity would not let her pass. Getting frustrated, Sunset gritted her teeth together.

"Get out of my *way* , you *tramp* !"

She pushed Rarity hard, sending her back several meters to the floor. By this time, the front door had shut. Looking up, Sunset took the opportunity and made a break for it, only for Rarity to grab her hoof as she passed. Sunset cried out as she fell. She twisted towards Rarity and growled.

"You *dare* trip me, you…you…?"

Rarity didn't let her finish as she swiftly stood up and grabbed her by the front of her dress.

"And what *am* I?!" she hissed. "Go on! Say it!" Without her intent, her eyes started turning red. " *Say* it!"

The yellow unicorn smirked unafraid. "You really think *that's* going to scare me? You have no idea what you…"

"I don't *care* what your station is!" Rarity spat, giving her a strong shake. "You think you can push me and expect me to…"

She paused as the strange scent she had caught earlier returned. Leaning closer to the mare, she inhaled sharply and gasped. Horrified, she let the lady go and backed away slowly.

"You…you were…"

Sunset scrunched her muzzle. "What are you going on a—?"

"No," Rarity murmured, shaking her head as her eyes became redder and redder. "No, no, NO! Not again! Not *now* !"

Before Sunset could question her hysteria, the white mare whizzed past her and out the door.

"Strange," Sunset huffed. "If they're vampires, they're the strangest ones *I've* ever seen."

As she returned to the party, all she could think about was how this evening was a complete waste of time. All she had done was find out that another one of Count Discord's servants was a vampire and attempt to ruin her reputation only to end up helping her win Lord Fancy Pants' favor. Meanwhile, Trenderhoof was out hunting somewhere, possibly shagging his meals before eating them, while she was here doing the dirty work.

Not to mention all this frustration was making her thirsty.

She spotted the earth stallion that had flirted with her earlier and grabbed him by the shirt. After flashing a look at Bulk, he followed them out.

"W-What are you doing?" he stammered as she dragged him into the hallway.

"You and I, domnule," Sunset smiled wickedly to herself, "are about to have some *fun* ."

It wasn't until Discord was safely in the black carriage that he stopped fighting his body from reverting to its original form. He sighed in relief as he slid in his seat and flexed his paw and claw.

"I am *so* glad to have these things again!"

A short moment later, Rarity joined him. As she slammed the carriage door, she fell into her seat panting.

"Rarity, what's wrong?" Discord asked in concern.

"That…that mare," she heaved, pointing outside. "The…the one who tried to stop us, she…her smell!"

"Smell?" After a thought, Discord smacked his face. "Oh, Rarity! Don't tell me you're developing a taste for *mares* too!"

"No, no, no! It wasn't *her* smell! It was…all around her, like…she'd been in contact recently with…with…"

"Rarity, calm down!" he exclaimed, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Deep breaths!" He waited until her breathing slowed. "Now. What's this about her smell?"

She took another breath for extra measure and then looked up at her master in fright. "She had this smell, like a stallion's cologne, but it was mixed with her perfume. And it was sticky, and fresh and… I've smelled it before. It was a long time ago, but I'm *certain* of it."

Discord leaned forward. "What?"

She shook her head. "Oh, Master. The last time I smelled that smell…it was on Tenderheart the night he raped and sired me."

I just realized, while I've paired Rarity with Fancy Pants before, I haven't written much about their relationship. It's hard, mostly because we don't see a lot of Fancy Pants (I'm glad he at least returned briefly in Season 5).

Don't worry, there will be more FlutterCord next chapter!

Desires

"Are you absolutely sure it was Tenderheart?" Discord asked Rarity once they'd returned to the castle.

"For the hundredth time," Rarity said gruffly as she hung up her cloak, "I'm *positive* !"

"But last time you saw him was a hundred years ago, and not to mention you didn't have your superior senses yet when he…"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Master, when some pony forces himself inside of you, even when you are out for half of it, even when it is too dark for you to see, there are two things you never forget: the sound of his voice and how he smells. It was *him* I tell you!"

He held up his paw and claw defensively. "Very well. I believe you. Still, what was his scent doing on that mare? And how come *I* didn't smell him?"

"Well," Rarity muttered, "you were a little *busy* making eyes at Fluttershy!"

"Fair enough."

"I don't know it was just… *everywhere* on her! Like his very essence was embedded in her fur, her mane, her skin. It was almost as if she had…" She gasped in realization. "She's *been* with him!"

"I figured as much," said Discord as they entered the main foyer. "Perhaps she bumped into him in the street or…"

He caught Rarity's glare and his eyes widened. " *Oh* ."

"And he *would* be chasing mares again!" Rarity growled.

"Do you suppose she's his next victim?"

"If so, I don't know why she's still alive if he *has* …you know, already…"

"No need to say it."

Rarity grimaced in terror. "What if he finds out *I'm* still alive?! What if he…?" She gasped dramatically. "Applejack! Oh, she's going to be in shock when she hears this!"

"Keep it together!" Discord commanded, grabbing her shoulders. "We don't know anything for sure yet, and until we have concrete evidence that Tenderheart *is* back, it's best we keep this to ourselves, *especially* from…"

He trailed off when he noticed Rarity looking past him. He turned around to follow her gaze. At the top of the stairs, Applejack was standing stiff, her eyes wide and her hooves gripping the banister to a point where the marble was cracking beneath them.

"He's…back?" she uttered through her quivering lips.

Discord glanced nervously back at Rarity, who was just as frozen as the earth pony.

"Applejack, I…"

"IS HE?!" she bellowed.

"We…" he said. "We're not sure, but…"

"I smelled him, Applejack!" Rarity blurted. "I didn't see him, but…I smelled him."

"No," Applejack heaved. "No, no, *no* ! He's not back! He *can't* be! He's not taking him away from me!"

She raced down the hall and Discord and Rarity flew upstairs to follow her. They found her in her room, kicking over furniture.

"He's *not* getting me!" she shouted as she watched her dresser tumble. "Not *this* time!" A chair smashed against the wall. "Not *now* ! Please, *please* , not now!"

Discord and Rarity grabbed her before she could bring her hooves down on her desk. She wriggled in their grasp, kicking in all

directions.

"Applejack, calm down!" Rarity exclaimed.

"No!" she screamed as they attempted to lower her into her coffin. "He's not getting me! He's not getting *him* ! I won't let him! I won't let him! I won't let him. I…won't…let…"

Her screams turned into sobs and soon she was hyperventilating. If breathing was actually necessary for their survival, she would've passed out by now.

"AJ, listen to me, alright?" Discord said in reassurance.

"No!" Applejack wheezed. "I can't see him again! Not after what he did to me! I can't do it! I can't…"

A slap across the face cut her off.

"Rarity!" Discord gawked.

"Pull yourself together, farm girl!" Rarity commanded as she snatched Applejack by the shoulders and forced her to look at her. "Look at me! Do you think *I'm* not upset about this too?! Yes, I was just as hysterical as you the minute I picked up his scent, but even if Tenderheart *is* back, so what? What did we say we'd do the moment we saw him again?"

Applejack thought a moment and muttered, "Rip off his head?"

Rarity nodded. "Then what?"

"Tear off his…legs?"

"One," she said with a smirk, tapping her on the muzzle, "by," then her forehead, "one. And then what?"

The earth mare narrowed her eyes in determination. "We dismember his member!"

"And *then* ?!"

She stood up. "We set the pieces on fire and watch 'em burn!"

"That's the spirit!" Rarity cheered, standing with her. "He may have wronged us, but he made one fatal mistake! He made us *stronger* ! Let him come! We'll make him sorry for it!"

Applejack smiled gratefully. "Thanks, Rarity." She frowned. "But still, ya sure ya smelled him?"

"Well, not exactly. I mean his scent was all over this mare who was at Fancy Pants' dinner party."

"Up to his old tricks, then?" Applejack huffed.

"Perhaps."

"Who was this mare?"

"I don't remember her name, but she was sitting two seats away from me. Discord, do you remember her name?"

He bit his lip guiltily. "Um…I, uh…"

Rarity rolled her eyes. "Of course. You were otherwise *occupied* ."

"Hold it!" Applejack exclaimed. "Twilight! She's been working on a spell to find the Sirens. Maybe she can do the same to find Tenderheart!"

"Or at least the mare I smelled!"

"Come on, let's go find her!"

Twilight was in a grand ballroom, surrounded by waltzing ponies. She stood alone by the buffet table. Some ponies were chatting and laughing not too far away, but they paid no heed to her. Some couples were making displays of themselves against the walls as they scraped at each other. Twilight shook her head in disgust.

"Well, aren't you a pretty little wallflower?"

She did not need to turn her head to know who was there.

"Not you again," she groaned.

"No need to be rude," Phoenix said, pretending to sound hurt. "I was only complimenting you."

"Would you please leave me alone? I've got better things to do."

Twilight drifted into the dancing crowd. She scanned them all, searching for the three faces she wanted to maul. She could hear them singing, calling to her, mocking her. If only she could pinpoint their location.

She found herself in the middle of the dancefloor. With her eyes glancing around and the ponies twirling around, it was as if the room was spinning. She couldn't make out any of the dancers' faces.

"You won't find them this way."

Suddenly the spinning stopped and Phoenix appeared in front of her, smirking spitefully.

"And what would *you* suggest?" Twilight demanded, crossing her hooves.

"I already told you," Phoenix said as she began circling her slowly. "You have to follow your instincts."

When she was behind her, she whispered lowly into her lavender ear. "I can help you with that."

A chill ran up Twilight's spine as Phoenix's hoof lightly touched her mane.

"Stop that!" she shouted, slipping away to face her. "That…that's disgusting!"

"Funny," Phoenix said, curling her lip into a puppy pout. "I was under the impression that you liked it."

"I…" Twilight stammered anxiously. "I…I did *not* !"

"Oh?"

Twilight shrieked as Phoenix appeared behind her again and threw her hooves around her middle before she could escape.

"Then I suppose you wouldn't like it if I did *this* ."

Twilight stiffened as she felt the seductress' cold tongue run up her neck. It made her skin tingle and her blood race. Snapping out of her trance, Twilight used her hooves to break out of Phoenix's hold.

"No! You…you're toying with me! You…" She gasped. " *You're* causing all this! You don't want me to find the Sirens, so you're creating these…visions to distract me!" She gasped again. "Or, *or* ! You really *don't* know where the Sirens are, and your being in Zebiu at the same time is just a coincidence! But you…you just wanna mess with me! This is another battle of wits, isn't it?! You're trying to break me by making me feel these… *things* ! Well, it won't work! I'm not…"

But Phoenix was laughing. "Oh, little Lavender. You think too much. Why don't you take a break?"

Twilight squeaked as Phoenix pounced on her, pinning her shoulders to the floor, which had suddenly become a bed.

"Just clear your mind," her captor whispered, running her yellow hooves down her forelegs, "and I'll help you to relax."

Twilight was paralyzed as Phoenix's face lunged towards hers.

"Twilight!"

"Get off me!" Twilight shouted, snapping up her head.

"Sorry!" Applejack apologized. "But we needed ya to wake up!"

The lavender unicorn wiped the sleep out of her eyes and blinked at the trio before her. Applejack, Rarity and Discord were staring at her strangely.

"I must say," said Rarity, "you were sleeping rather soundly."

Twilight rubbed the back of her neck awkwardly. "I, um…uh…" She shook her head. "What was it that you needed?"

"Oh, right," Applejack said, clearing her throat. "Ya see, when Rarity and Discord were at the dinner party…"

"I smelled Tenderheart!" Rarity finished quickly.

Twilight's eyes widened. "You *saw* him?!"

"No, but I smelled him on some mare. A very *rude* mare if you ask me! We were just minding our own business when she…"

"Wait, wait, wait!" Twilight interjected, holding up a hoof. "What did this mare look like?"

Rarity tapped her chin as she tried to recall. "She was a unicorn with a yellow coat. No, maybe it was more like a shade of goldenrod. Her mane was curly, streaked with brick-red and…"

" *Also* goldenrod?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

Twilight put her hooves to either side of her head. "Oh my Darkness! It makes perfect sense!"

"What makes sense?"

"While you and Discord were away, I saw some pony lurking outside Spike's bedroom window."

Applejack gasped. "Why didn't ya tell me?!"

Twilight bit her lip guiltily. "I didn't want you to worry. I didn't get a good look at him, but I'm pretty sure it was a unicorn stallion."

The orange mare's hooves flew up to her mouth. "H-He…he was…"

Rarity caught her before she could crumple to the floor.

"The mare you described," Twilight said, "matches the description of the vampire mare I met a couple nights ago." She turned to

Applejack. "You said the Sirens claimed there were five in their coven, including themselves and Phoenix."

"Phoenix?" Discord and Rarity questioned.

"My mystery mare. Anyway, she said she had a mate, and if Rarity smelled Tenderheart on her and the master of the coven is still unaccounted for…"

"…Tenderheart must be their master!" Discord finished.

"Exactly!"

"So he really *is* back," Applejack whimpered as Rarity cradled her. "And he was here, at Spike's window…"

"He's *not* going to get Spike, Applejack!" Twilight declared.

"He's not going to have *any* of you," Discord said with a firm nod, "you can be certain of that! No pony messes with *my* family!"

"Rarity, do you remember this mare's name?"

"No," Rarity replied, shaking her head. "I remember it had something to do with the sun, and something shiny."

"Are there any other details you remember that can help us?"

"All I know is that she is nobility, or at least claims to be. With split ends like hers I wouldn't be surprised if she was pretending!"

Once Applejack was able to stand on her hooves again, she looked at Twilight pleadingly. "Do ya think you could use that spell you've been workin' on to find Tenderheart, before he finds us?"

If vampires could blush, Twilight's face would've been beat red at that moment. "The, um…the spell's not working at the moment. I think, uh…I need to see Zecora again before making another attempt."

Truthfully, she didn't want another subconscious meeting with Phoenix. Whatever was causing her to have these dreams was

making it difficult for her to focus on her magic. Even now, the seductive mare was laughing in her head, taunting her.

Now Twilight knew for sure she was connected to the Sirens, even Tenderheart. Phoenix was trying to prevent her from finding them. She was the true siren, distracting her from her goal.

Well, Phoenix , she mentally told the spiteful cackle, *you're going to have to do better than that.*

In the middle of the forest, Bulk Biceps waited patiently outside a carriage, which was rocking wildly back and forth. The screams and growls from inside did not move him.

"Why," came a snarl, followed by a thump, "can't," another thump, accompanied by a shriek, "I," harder this time, "buck," the second voice squealed, "YOU?!"

"Please, please!" a stallion's voice whined. "Have mercy!"

"Ugh! Worthless!" Bulk could hear the stallion being tossed around like a ragdoll. "Completely *worthless* !"

Soon the rumbling stopped and a few minutes later, Sunset emerged. Her mane was in a tangle and her clothes were soiled with blood. Wiping her mouth on her sleeve, she slammed the carriage door shut with a groan.

"Did you take care of the coach pony?"

Bulk glanced down at the marred corpse still attached to the vehicle's shaft.

"Nice," Sunset said, nodding approvingly. "With our luck, they'll think a pack of wolves did it. But we should get going." She smirked at her servant as she reopened the door. "Unless you wanted to pick off the bones of the Duke of Death here."

Bulk turned his head away.

"Suit yourself," she said, shutting the door again. "Let's get out of here."

Her servant cleared his throat and pointed to her tattered gown.

"Whoops," she chuckled. "Guess I got a little carried away there. Oh well, easy fix."

She powered up her horn and in a split second, her dress was cleaned and mended. She did the same for Bulk's suit.

"Remind me to dress more casually next time we go out," Sunset said. "Now let's go before Lady Starlight starts wondering where we are."

As they walked side-by-side, Sunset began glancing nervously at Bulk. He was silent, stoically looking ahead. It made her antsy.

"I suppose you," she said with a gulp, "heard what went on in there."

He said nothing.

"Then again, you probably didn't need super hearing for that."

He glanced down at her.

" *Yes* ! Okay?! *Yes* I was trying to have sex with him! I was trying to get back at Trenderhoof, okay?! Don't think I don't know what he does with *his* food before he eats it! Don't think I don't know what those 'private meetings' with the Dazzlings are all about! I'm not *stupid* !"

Her rage turned to sadness as blood highlighted her eyes. "What's wrong with me, Bulk? Am I not… *pretty* enough?"

" *Nothing's* wrong with you, Mistress!" Bulk replied hastily. "Trenderhoof *adores* you! He sets you above every pony else!"

"Then why isn't he faithful to me?"

He opened his mouth but hesitated to answer. She looked up at him with teary eyes.

"It's true, isn't it?" she croaked. "You don't have to tell me. I know he would've made you swear to secrecy." She wiped her cheeks clean. "I just don't get it. *I'm* supposed to be his mate. So how come I'm not…happy?"

Sympathetic for her, Bulk gently laid a hoof on her shoulder. "I won't tell him what happened tonight, Mistress."

She looked up at him with a thankful smile. "I knew I always liked you, Bulk."

He returned her smile and when her face was dry, they continued on their way.

What Sunset didn't tell him was the second reason she had done what she had done tonight. She wanted to prove that she hadn't lost her ability to perform and that perhaps Trenderhoof was the problem. However, even with the helpless stallion in her grasp, she couldn't go through with it. Every time she lunged at the stallion, the face of the lavender unicorn would appear. Physically torturing the fool was easy, but every time she got close to his member, her brain would rattle and her thighs would pinch. And still that accursed mare would glare accusingly at her.

"I swear, next time I see that dumb Lavender, I'm going to *maim* her!"

Bulk looked at her questioningly, but she paid no heed.

"I'll toss her around like a salad, then press her against a wall and pound her so hard until she is all rubbery and limp! Then I'll bang her to a pulp, again, and again, and again, and a—"

"What are you talking about?"

Remembering that Bulk was there, Sunset stumbled over her reply.

"I was, uh…I…err…" She narrowed her eyes. "Shut up!"

Discord had barely opened the window when Fluttershy attacked

him with a kiss, her hooves hooking around his neck. He was so caught off-guard that he nearly fell backward. But after a few seconds, his eyes closed blissfully as he returned her embrace. It was easy for him to forget to warn her about Tenderheart and his coven.

"Well," Discord breathed as she pulled away. "Not that I'm complaining, but what did I do to receive such a welcome?"

His beloved smiled sweetly up at him as she caressed his jawline. "That was just for being you."

"Ah! So you really *did* miss my handsome face then, eh?"

She nodded eagerly. "It just wasn't the same. I know it's not the first time you've looked that way around me, but we've just seen each other so much like this that…"

"Shhh," he whispered, putting a paw to her lips. "Say no more, my love." He wriggled his eyebrows playfully at her. "We have more *interesting* things to do than talk."

She giggled as he leaned in for another kiss. Her mouth opened automatically and their tongues immediately entwined. Wanting to feel his body against hers, she tugged down on his neck, bringing him further into the room. Discord's eyes popped open when he felt the veins in his face pounding, ready to burst.

"Fluttershy!" he said, yanking himself away from her. "Aren't you forgetting something?"

"What?" Fluttershy asked, genuinely confused.

"You haven't invited me in yet!"

"Oh! You can come in."

"Good."

He sprang into the room, scooped her up into his arms and pressed his lips hungrily against hers. Fluttershy moaned in satisfaction. Discord drew himself away again as something occurred to him.

"Where's that rabbit of yours?" he inquired, glancing around the room. "Shouldn't he be trying to break us apart by now?"

"I put him to sleep in the parlor," Fluttershy explained. "He might leave presents on the carpet, which won't please my aunt at all, but I'll worry about that later." She blushed as she gazed up at him. "After today, I wanted us to have a little… *privacy* tonight."

"Are those candles?" Discord asked when he noticed the glimmering wax sticks on the dressers and side tables.

"Yes. Oh, does fire really bother you?"

He shrugged. "Only when I'm in direct contact."

"Well, don't worry. I made sure they're a safe distance from the bed."

Glancing at said bed, he noted various violet sprinkles adorning the covers. "Flower petals?"

"F-From the Infinite Iris," she stammered. "The p-petals grow b-back, you know?"

The implication of the scenery made Discord set the pegasus down and take a step back, much to both their displeasure.

"Fluttershy, I thought we agreed we weren't going to take our relationship any further until we were married."

"Oh no, I wasn't…" Fluttershy said with a blush. "I just…tonight made me realize…how l-lucky we are. Not many couples get to spend much time together like we do. Alone, that is. And I just thought…well, you're always making the romantic gestures and I figured…it was…m-my turn?"

She looked away from him, feeling silly for the idea. He was probably going to laugh at her. Instead, he smiled and knelt down to her.

"So we agree that what we share is a *romance* ?"

Facing him again and seeing his grin, she smiled too and nodded.

"Well then, my little Gwhinnyvere," he said, smirking seductively as he inched closer to her, "are you ready for your Prancelot to take you?"

Fluttershy chuckled and held out her hooves. "Yes. Take me."

He swept her up and carried her to the bed. As they landed on the mattress, the violet petals flew up into the air and rained down on them in a sweet-smelling shower. It was like his dreams, where they would lie together in the flowerbeds. All that was missing was the brilliant light from the sun, but the candles would have to do.

He kissed her passionately, his paw and claw running along her frame while Fluttershy's hooves did some exploring of their own. He didn't realize how far she was reaching down until he felt a squeeze on his backside.

"Fluttershy!" he gasped, wrenching himself away in shock.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Fluttershy said. "Should I have asked your permission first?"

Her tone was innocent, but her eyes were playful. Discord smirked at her behavior.

"When we first met you wouldn't let me get anywhere near you. Now you're *fondling* with me? I think I'm a bad influence on you, darling."

She pouted her lip. "You make that sound like a *bad* thing."

He chuckled throatily. "Oh, you little *tease* !"

He went for her mouth again and while Fluttershy didn't go for his bottom again, her hooves were certainly getting touchy. Was it the candles? Was it the flowery scent adorning them? Whatever it was, Discord could feel his desire for her growing.

His claw absentmindedly traced the edge of her skirt, begging for entrance. Opening his eyes slightly, he caught sight of her neck. It would be so easy for him to sink his teeth into her succulent flesh. He had gotten a small taste of it through his kisses. All it would take was one swift motion and her life essence would be his.

With the way she was stroking his spine, she had no idea how difficult she was making it for him to resist the temptation. He wanted her so much, but he kept his self-control. He had to remind himself that unless she said the word, he had no real claim over her.

But the waiting was agony.

"Fluttershy," he murmured.

"Yes?" Fluttershy replied, holding him close as she caught her breath.

He took a strand of her mane and twirled it around his finger. "What would you say if…I were to ask you to marry me?" He lightly kissed the strings of silk. "Right now?"

He could feel her body stiffen at his question. She leaned back so that she was lying on the pillows and looking up at him. Her eyes held a mixture of shock and nervousness.

" *Are* you asking?"

He shrugged. "Depends on your answer."

But he could already read it in her expression.

"Discord," she breathed, her voice dropping to its usual level of quietness. "I-I *do* love you, but…this… *us* …it's…it's all happened so quickly and I…"

He sighed sadly, his ears drooping. "I understand."

"Don't get me wrong! It's just…marrying you wouldn't be…just *marrying* you, I mean I'd have to…"

Discord could feel her hooves slipping away from him. The heat between them had died for the moment, so he shifted away from her embrace and settled down beside her.

"You don't have to explain it to me, Fluttershy. After all, any other marriage vow lasts until death. But with vampires…"

"…it's for eternity."

He nodded. "I know it's a lot to ask from you, but it wouldn't be all bad, I promise! You love animals, yes, but we can arrange it so you won't have to do any killing. I'll make sure none of the animals I bring you suffer! You don't even have to see their bodies if you don't want…"

"Can we not talk about this right now?" she asked in a choked voice.

"Right, right."

There was a long period of silence as they lay next to each other, not crossing the invisible barrier of awkwardness that had come between them. Discord felt awful for bringing the subject up in the first place and possibly ruining the rest of their night.

"Discord?"

"Yes?"

She gulped. "S-Suppose I… *did* say yes. W-What…what about my aunt?"

"What about her?"

"Discord!" she said, propping herself up so she could glare at him. "As…difficult as my aunt can be, she is still my family and will be concerned if I'm suddenly a vampire."

"No pony said you had to tell her," he said with a shrug.

"All the same, she's sure to notice when years pass and I still look twenty years old."

"With any luck, she'll pass away before it becomes apparent."

"Discord, that's not a very nice…" She paused when she realized the truth in that statement. "Oh. I…I hadn't given much thought to…"

She fell back on her pillow and Discord could sense her distress. He wanted to shield her in his embrace, but he didn't have permission.

Fortunately, he didn't have to ask, for she was already curling up next to him for support.

"Forgive me," he said as he wrapped his arms around her. "That was inconsiderate of me to say."

"It's alright," Fluttershy murmured. "I mean…I always knew that she wouldn't always be… She'll want to come to the wedding, you know?"

"Yes, I expected as much. We could still have a traditional ceremony, so your aunt can attend and our union can be legalized in the eyes of society."

"Would that be before or," she said, swallowing the lump in her throat, " *after* we…?"

She didn't need to finish. "We'll want to be somewhere secluded. After you wake up, you'll be incredibly thirsty, and you wouldn't want to be around ponies when that happens. Since questions will be asked if you suddenly disappear for a while, the best time for us to do it would be on our honeymoon. We'll be expected to be away and alone together then."

"Where will we even go?"

"As I recall, I promised to take you to Zebrica, but we could really go anywhere: Prance, Germaneigh, Amareica, Japony, anywhere you want!"

Fluttershy closed her eyes blissfully at the thought. "I've always wanted to see the world."

"And so you shall. This I promise you."

Frowning suddenly, she clutched his shirt. "Will I be…different? I mean of course I'll be different, but will I still be…me?"

"I imagine so," he said, smiling as he brushed some petals out of her mane. "Of course I didn't know most of the girls before they changed, but I knew Twilight. She may be stronger in more ways than one, but she is still as bookish and independent as ever.

Though like she said, some of your characteristics will be improved, so really you'll be becoming a better version of yourself."

"What sort of characteristics?" she asked, twisting her head so she could look up at him.

"Well, for one thing, though I highly doubt it's possible," he said, kissing the top of her head, "you'll be even more beautiful and angelic than you are now."

She smiled at his compliment, but her face was still etched with worry.

"Hey," he whispered, combing her mane with his claw. "Whatever the future holds for us, whatever changes either of us go through, one thing will remain the same."

"What?"

Grinning, he caressed her face. "I will always love you."

He waited for her reply, but she was silent, staring up at him unsurely. As his smile wavered, she reached out to his face and brought his lips to hers in a gentle peck.

"I love you too," she said softly. "But it's just too soon."

He sighed. "Don't worry. I'm immortal, remember? I have all the time in the world to wait."

But as they lay soundly in each other's embrace, concern dwindled in their thoughts, for they both knew that while Discord had an eternity, Fluttershy did not.

Starting next chapter, this story's going to be moving forward.

It Is Not The Fashion

The first thing Fluttershy noticed the next morning was the scent of burning flesh. Opening her eyes, she saw Discord's eagle arm sizzling across her chest. Discord was sleeping contently beside her, not seeming to notice that he was roasting in the morning light.

"Discord!"

"Hmm?" he moaned in response.

Fluttershy wiggled out of his grasp. "The sun!"

"Huh?" he said, snapping up. "What?"

"The *sun* !" she cried, pointing to the open window.

Looking down at himself, he shrieked. Fluttershy sprang from her bed while Discord ducked beneath the covers. Rapidly, she shut the window and drew the curtains.

"Thank goodness," she said, panting in relief.

"Phew!" Discord heaved, cautiously peering out from under the blankets. "That was a close one! A second longer and I would've been a goner!"

Fluttershy gasped when she saw the various burn marks adorning his face and arms and the charred holes in his shirt.

"Are you alright?" she asked, rushing to him.

"Don't worry about me," he said with a shrug. "I'm a fast healer." He smirked slyly at her. "Though it wouldn't hurt if you kissed and made it all better."

He held out his scorched claw. Grinning, she took it in her hooves and brushed her lips against the wound. Discord sighed in satisfaction.

"You know, I think my lips got the worst of it."

"Discord!" Fluttershy laughed at his puckered lips.

"Fine!" he groaned. "It was my tongue."

She chuckled as she shook her head. "I'm starting to think you're not actually hurt."

"Oh, I am!" he said with a wink. "I'm just taking advantage of the situation!"

Her smile wavered as she examined his injuries.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I…I was just so frightened that…that I'd lost you."

"Hey," he said, ruffling her mane. "You can't get rid of me *that* easily."

"What are you still doing here anyway? You should've left hours ago!"

He shrugged. "I just couldn't stay away from you, darling."

"Well," she murmured, running her hooves over his scorches. "I don't see how you're going to be able to get home now."

"Looks like I'm stuck here then," he said with a smirk. "What do you think we should do?"

"Well I'm going to have to go to breakfast soon and…"

When she looked up, his eyes were locked on her lips.

"Oh."

Slowly, he raised his claw to her face and gently pulled it towards his.

"Domnişoară?"

Coco Pommel's voice alerted them and their heads snapped to the door as the maid knocked on it.

"Are you awake?"

Fluttershy squeaked in panic. "You can't be here!"

"Relax," Discord whispered. "She's not going to come barging in…"

"Domnişoară, is some pony in there?"

"Hide!" Fluttershy hissed.

Discord yelped as he was shoved off the bed and hastened to the wardrobe.

"Ouch!" he cried out as a hanger poked him in the eye. "It's kind of cramped in here!"

"Hush!" Fluttershy pleaded. "Just stay here! I'll get her to leave!"

Shutting the wardrobe, she rushed to the door and smoothed out her skirts before opening it. She greeted the maid with a smile.

" *Bună dimineaţa* , Coco!"

The earth mare glanced curiously past her mistress. "I thought I heard voices."

"V-Voices?" Fluttershy asked innocently.

"Yes. Something about…hiding?"

"Hiding? Oh, I was…" She stammered as she thought up a quick lie. "I w-was talking to…a bird! Yes! There was a bird at my window and you know how my aunt hates having animals in the house! Oh, *please* don't tell her I had a bird in here, Coco!"

"Oh!" Coco said, sighing in relief. "Of course not, domnişoară! For a minute I thought you had a…"

"A what?" Fluttershy squeaked, glancing nervously at the wardrobe.

"Oh, never mind. Do you need help dressing for breakfast, my lady?"

"No thank you! I can handle it myself! Thank you though!"

She slammed the door and turned around to see Discord standing over her, making her shriek.

"Can *I* help you with getting dressed?" he asked mischievously.

Narrowing her eyes, she lightly pushed him aside. "No, you may not!"

"Only kidding!" he said, holding up his paw and claw. "I'll just stand in the corner over there."

And so he did. Once Fluttershy was certain his back was towards her, she went to her wardrobe to fetch her stockings and undergarments.

"Do you have any idea how much trouble I'd be in if any pony knew I had a stallion in my room?" she asked as she slid her black stockings onto her rear hooves.

"I'm not exactly a stallion," Discord said with a shrug.

"You're still a male."

"So? If any pony walked in I could make them forget."

"Suppose they didn't walk in. Suppose they were listening at the door. Suppose my aunt was out there right now!"

"I can hear outside the door. No pony's there."

Turning his head slightly, he glanced over his shoulder.

"No peeking!"

"Sorry!" he said, snapping his head back to the wall.

He heard Fluttershy grunt in frustration.

"Although you could help me with *one* thing."

"Can I look then?"

"You might as well. I'm decent enough."

He turned around to see her in her undergarments, her hooves struggling to reach the laces of her corset.

"I can never get this thing on properly!"

Fortunately, Discord had the right appendages for this task. Trying not to stare, he went to work on her corset.

"I never fully understood why mares wear these things."

"Auntie Starlight says they," she gasped as he tightened the strings, "keep…our…figure!"

"But you look perfectly fine without one! Besides, the girls tell me they're dreadfully uncomfortable."

"Oh, but it's customary."

"You know what I think?" Discord said, settling his head on her shoulder so she could see his sly grin. "Ditch the corset for the day!"

"I couldn't do that!" Fluttershy said in appalment. "My aunt would notice!"

"What's she going to do? Look down your bodice to make sure you're wearing it?"

She glanced down at the constricting corset. "I don't know…"

"Fine. Who needs to breathe, anyway? I know *I* don't."

"It *is* uncomfortable…"

"It's settled then!" Discord piped as he ripped the corset off her body. Feeling exposed, Fluttershy wrapped her hooves around herself. "We'll go crazy today! What's next?"

"Well," Fluttershy said with a gulp. "There's the crinoline…"

He cocked an eyebrow. "The what now?"

She brought a bell-shaped steel cage out of the wardrobe. "It's for the skirt."

"That thing's supposed to go around your *waist* ?" Discord asked, pointing at the cage with wide eyes.

"Mmm-hmm. Then comes the camisole, which goes over the corset, or my chemise in this case, then comes the petticoat which protects the skirt from the hoop…"

"And *then* comes the dress?"

"No. Then comes another petticoat and then…"

Discord smacked himself in the forehead. "Do you mares dress like this *all* the time? Even in the *summer* ?!"

"Well…yes?"

He shook his head. "No *wonder* Rainbow dresses like a stallion!" Decidedly, he held up his paw and claw. "That's it. Under no circumstances am I letting you go out in that deathtrap you call an ensemble!"

With a snap of his talons, a sangria red gown appeared on Fluttershy. Looking down, she realized she felt strangely comfortable, not feeling the usual pinch and scrape of the crinoline. Lifting her skirts, she saw that the cage was gone, yet the dress kept its perfect bell shape.

"What did you do?" she asked in bewilderment.

"It's an illusion," Discord explained giddily. "Now you can be comfortable, yet *still* fashionable! Though if you ask me, you don't need to dress to impress." He knelt down and murmured sincerely, "You're already impressive as you are."

Touched by this gesture, Fluttershy raised her head towards his.

Discord closed his eyes and leaned forward.

"Lady Fluttershy?"

She did not waste a second as she shoved Discord back into the closet, making him shriek.

"Sorry!" she hissed before turning her attention to the door. "Come in!"

The door opened by magic and she was surprised by who entered.

"Count Trenderhoof! W-What are you doing here?"

"I simply came to inquire for you," he said as he casually traced his hoof along her vanity. "We're all waiting for you in the dining room."

"Oh, yes!" Fluttershy said, putting on a smile. "I was just on my way! I just need to choose my jewelry."

Discord pushed the wardrobe open a crack. He couldn't see the count's face, but noticed his brown hoof inspecting Fluttershy's jewelry.

"Perhaps I can help you," Trenderhoof said, eyeing the sun pendant. "Phew!" he heaved, taking out a handkerchief to pat his forehead, which lacked perspiration. "A bit warm today."

Lowering the cloth in his hoof, he inched it cautiously towards the necklace.

"Oh, thank you!" Fluttershy said, snatching up the necklace. "I was looking for that!"

Trenderhoof mentally cursed himself, but forced a grin.

"Oh, you wouldn't mind helping me put this on, would you?"

He recoiled as she held the pendant out towards him, but said through his teeth, "It would be my *pleasure* , domnişoară."

He used his magic to levitate it around her neck, but even that was a

strain on his brain.

"Didn't the Count Discord give this to you?"

"Mmm-hmm," Fluttershy said as she faced him again.

"I see," Trenderhoof said with a nod. "My sister tells me the two of you are a very…congenial towards each other."

"W-What do you mean?"

He took a step towards her. "Sunset tells me that you and the count are…engaged?"

Fluttershy blushed as she stepped back. "No, no. I mean…we've *talked* about it, but…"

"Oh, but surely you are," he said, still advancing towards her. "After all, you've been alone with him on at least one occasion."

She stiffened. "I…I don't know what you're…"

"I heard from the servants that the other night when you went to visit him, your escorts abandoned you to…well, what the riffraff sneaks off to do all the time, leaving you alone with the count."

Unsure what to say, she gulped.

"I must say, domnişoară, I did not take you for that sort of mare."

Discord clutched the closet door so hard that he pierced the mahogany. That wretched stallion was not only getting awfully close to his beloved, but he was outright calling her a harlot! He was about ready to jump out and slash his throat when Fluttershy's voice stopped him.

"Begging your pardon, your lordship, but it is strange that you should accuse me of fornication, when *you* were the one who came into *my* private bedchamber, knowing full well I was alone! I suggest you leave before some pony accuses *you* of the same crime!"

The hidden draconequus couldn't help but grin with pride at his

love's boldness, while Trenderhoof stared at the mare in surprise. Nevertheless, he smiled politely.

"My apologies, domnişoară," he said with a bow. "I shall take my leave now. But before I do, my sister and I were thinking of going into town today, as we have yet to see its sights. Perhaps you would accompany us later for a little tour?"

While Fluttershy still felt insulted, it would be rude to turn down Trenderhoof's invitation, so she did a small curtsy and replied, "It would be my honor, my lord."

Once the count was gone, Discord fell out of the wardrobe and onto the floor with a yelp. He looked up at Fluttershy as she giggled.

"I don't like him."

"Jealous, are we?" she said teasingly.

He stood up and grinned down at her. "Not with the way you handled yourself there! What happened to the frightened little pegasus I met in the woods?"

She shrugged. "I suppose you really are an influence on me." Then she shook her head suddenly. "You can't stay here all day, Discord. Sooner or later, some pony's bound to find out about you. We've got to get you home somehow."

"You may be right." Discord stroked his beard in thought. "Usually in this situation, the girls get the black carriage to shield me from the sun. But I can't do that without some pony seeing me leave the house."

"What if you turned into an animal?" Fluttershy suggested. "What's the smallest thing you can change into?"

"Either a bat or a snake." He gasped. "That's it!"

He explained his plan and Fluttershy agreed that it was the sneakiest way. She went to her writing desk and started on a letter.

"But who should we address this to?" she asked as she slipped the

paper into an envelope. "Some pony's sure to ask why I'm writing to one of your servants rather than yourself."

"Oh, just address it to me," Discord said, waving his paw. "One of the girls is bound to open it regardless. Trust me, they're as curious as cats."

Without warning, the door slammed open and Discord whizzed under the bed.

"Fluttershy!" Starlight hollered, holding up a feisty Angel. "What was *this* doing in the parlor?"

Fluttershy smiled nervously. "He, um…must've snuck out of my room and…"

"If you weren't my niece, I'd have you clean up the mess he made yourself!" She tossed the rabbit into the room. "Just don't let it happen again or he's out!"

The door shut and Angel glared furiously up at Fluttershy and then at Discord when he crawled out from under the bed. The bunny squeaked accusations at the draconequus.

"No, no, Angel!" Fluttershy insisted. "It's not what you think!"

Discord growled to quiet him down.

"Well, I must go now, Discord," she said as she licked the envelope closed. "I'll send this to your castle at once. Just stay hidden until one of the girls comes."

Before she could leave, Discord leaned his paw against the door and smirked. "I'll see you again tonight though, won't I?"

She smiled and brought his face down to give him one last kiss. "Only if you promise not to keep me waiting."

Their eyes didn't leave each other until she was gone, leaving Discord with a furious rabbit.

"So, little Angel Bunny, what do you do for fun around here?"

"Blech!" Sunset gagged as she stepped in a substance of indeterminable origin. "Bullarest is *much* cleaner than *this* pigsty!"

She, Trenderhoof, Bulk Biceps and Fluttershy were walking down the streets of Zebiu. Sunset and Trenderhoof had their forelegs entwined, although the latter had offered his to Fluttershy. The unicorn mare's horn was busy as she flapped a fan in her face and held a parasol over her head.

"Well, this is the town square," Fluttershy told them. "This is where many performers come."

Sure enough, the cobblestone square was overrun with dancers, musicians and magicians. Just a few meters away from them a unicorn stallion was playing his guitar while his daughter danced with a tambourine.

"You have so many gypsies here," Trenderhoof said, shaking his head in disgust. "Don't your police have any competence?"

"Romane," Fluttershy murmured.

"Pardon?"

Fluttershy spoke louder and firmer. "They prefer to be called *Romane* ."

Sunset rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Let's get out of here before they go for our purses."

"Just a moment."

Fluttershy diverged from her entourage momentarily towards the father-daughter pair. Before Trenderhoof could protest, she tossed three coins into their hat.

" *Mulțumim* , domnişoară," the Romane mare said with a curtsy. "May Celestia bless you."

"You too," Fluttershy said, holding out her sun pendant to

emphasize her sincerity.

"My lady!" Trenderhoof called. "Come back here!"

Returning the dancer's curtsy, Fluttershy trotted back to her companions.

"That was not very wise," the count said, "giving your money to those gypsy thieves."

"They are not thieves," she said. "They earned that money."

"They would've robbed you blind while you were distracted. Gypsies can't be trusted."

"They are *Romane* , but thank you for your concern. However," Fluttershy said as she showed him her purse, which was still full, "it seems it was not required in this case."

Trenderhoof watched with his mouth agape as the pegasus mare trotted ahead. Bulk was trying to hide his smirk. Sunset made no effort.

" *Some pony* grew a spine," she said. "I'll give her that."

"Fluttershy!"

Fluttershy turned upon hearing her name and saw a familiar face racing up to her.

"Scootaloo!" she greeted, kneeling down to the young filly.

"You remember me?" Scootaloo said.

"How could I forget? You were the one who told me about the…" She glanced around and whispered, "You know."

"I see you're well protected," the filly said, pointing at her necklace. "No vampire's a match for Celestia's power. That might be why they burn up in the…"

Scootaloo grew quiet when Fluttershy's companions approached

them, her attention particularly focused on Trenderhoof.

"Is this urchin bothering you, domnişoară?" he said, waving his hoof. "Run along now, little one."

"It's alright, Count Trenderhoof," Fluttershy assured him. "Scootaloo's a friend of mine."

"You know its *name* ?" Sunset exclaimed in appalment.

"Don't be rude." She turned back to Scootaloo. "How have you been?"

"Err, great," the filly stammered, her eyes not leaving the count. "I bought some hot buns with the bits you gave me. I was so hungry though that I ate 'em up right away."

Fluttershy examined her clothes. "Isn't that the same dress you wore last time I saw you?"

"Oh, yeah," Scootaloo said, looking down at herself. "It's the only dress I have. Had to turn it inside-out it was getting so dirty."

"Why don't you just wash it?" Sunset huffed.

The filly narrowed her eyes at her. "I don't even have a *bed* . You think I have a *washboard* ?"

"Where are your parents?" Fluttershy asked in concern.

She shrugged. "Dad left when I was a bay. Mom died not too long ago. But it's okay, I mean Pony Joe down at the tavern lets me sleep on his floor if I do a little cleaning and stuff, and I get enough bits to eat at least once a day."

The mare's heart ached as she heard this, and opened to the little beggar girl. Fluttershy smiled as an idea occurred to her.

"We simply *must* get you some new clothes!"

"What?!" Trenderhoof and Sunset gasped.

"Aw, you don't have to do that, domnişoară," Scootaloo said modestly.

"Oh, but it'll be winter soon," Fluttershy insisted, laying a hoof on her shoulder. "You'll need a fresh set of clothes to keep you warm."

The filly grinned hopefully. "You really mean it?"

"You helped me once. Now I'll do something for you."

"Gee. You're real nice."

"Domnişoară," Trenderhoof said with a nervous laugh, "I must urge you to reconsider! This gypsy…"

"Is but a poor, starving filly!" Fluttershy finished firmly. "The least we can do is get her something proper to wear!"

Scootaloo glanced anxiously at the trio. "They're…coming with us?"

"Don't worry about them. They're good ponies." She looked back at them. "You don't mind coming along, do you?"

Trenderhoof had his reservations, but nevertheless he put on a smile. "If it is that important to you, my lady, then we shall help you with this…charity case."

"Good. Come on, Scootaloo. The boutique's not far from here."

"Boutique?" Scootaloo said. "Hey, I'm all for getting new clothes, but don't go turning me into a *lady* ! Oh, it works for *you* Fluttershy, but it's just not me!"

Fluttershy chuckled. "I'm sure we can find something suitable for your taste."

She led the filly down the street while her guests reluctantly followed.

"Are we seriously doing this?" Sunset whispered to Trenderhoof.

"With Count Discord as our competition," he replied in a murmur,

"we need to win her favor any way we can."

"I don't trust that filly, not just because she's a gypsy. Didn't you see that look she gave us? She suspects something. Those horrid gypsies always do. Plus she's wearing garlic."

"Don't worry. If she becomes suspicious, I'll send the Dazzlings after her tonight. Unless *you'd* rather have her, darling."

She snorted. "I don't go for the taste of filthy gyp—hey!" She cried out as a mare bumped into her and kept moving. "Watch where you're going, insolent peasant!"

Rolling her eyes, the mare mumbled, "Overindulgent aristocrat."

Sunset snapped around. "What did you call me?!"

"Let it go, darling," Trenderhoof said, holding her back. "She's not worth our time."

She hadn't seen the peasant's face, for it was mostly hidden behind her violet kerchief. Twilight had already forgotten the rude noblemare she had run into, for she was too focused on her task. She had been quite annoyed upon receiving Fluttershy's letter dictating that Discord had accidentally slept in at her mansion. How could her master have been so careless?

It did, however, give her the opportunity to see Zecora.

She knocked on the witch's door, quickly so the hanging garlic would not sting her.

"Come in, my dear," said the zebra's voice. "I am in here."

Being granted her invitation, Twilight opened the door and found Zecora at her table, stringing garlic bulbs into a necklace.

"I'm guessing you heard about the new vampire coven in town."

The zebra looked up at her and nodded. "I know all your methods and styles. The recent deaths fit none of your profiles. Have you come to assure me of this? Or is there something else amiss?"

"Two things, actually," Twilight said, coming forward but refusing to sit near the wretched bulbs. "First, I tried the locator spell you taught me to find the Sirens who, by the way, are part of this visiting coven, but I get nothing more than a blurry image."

"That was expected," Zecora said. "You are affected, skilled though you are, by your thoughts, which muddle your mind, giving you squat. Something has created distraction, and prevented the extraction of what you desire to know. But what did your vision show?"

The unicorn cringed. "That's the other thing. I think I've been cursed."

Zecora cocked her head. "A vampire who is…cursed? You think you are the first?"

"I mean besides the obvious! I think some pony's put a spell on me! This vampire I met in the woods has been giving me these dreams!"

"Dreams?" the zebra said, her eyebrows rising.

" *Erotic* dreams! *Unnatural* dreams! They're more like nightmares, actually!"

"Did you not tell me that all dreams are absent, till the vampire meets the one for whom they are meant?"

"Yes!"

Zecora smiled. "Then there is your solution. No reason for confusion."

"No, no, no!" Twilight exclaimed, slamming her hoof on the table. "You don't understand! The vampire I keep dreaming about is a *mare* !"

The zebra's grin disappeared and she was silent.

"It *has* to be a spell! She's toying with me! Why? I don't know! Maybe she doesn't want me finding her singing friends and is trying to distract me!"

"Or perhaps, if I am not mistaken, that the dreams have been awakened by the meeting of this mare." Zecora smirked slyly. "And she is the one with whom you must share…"

"Wait," Twilight said, stiffening at the witch's look. "Oh no. No, no, *no* ! You *can't* be suggesting that she and I…"

The zebra shrugged. "Why should I question the workings of Fate? We have no control over who is our true mate."

The vampire stared at her and then laughed. "Oh, I get it! You're *joking* ! Did *she* talk you into this? Or is this your own doing?" Her laughter died when Zecora did not immediately confess. "No. Just… *no* ! There is *no* way that me and her…that she and I are…she's a *mare* for crying out loud!"

"Twilight Sparkle, you must accept the path that's given. Surely you can see that you are driven to…"

She grabbed the front of the zebra's dress and pulled her across the table. Her eyes were reddening as they pierced through the witch's soul.

"I am *not* destined to be with a mare! I'm not destined to be with *anybody* ! I thought I was, but the love of my life was slain before we could be together! Even if I'm meant to love again, it would *not* be with a mare! *Especially not her* !"

Her hooves were sizzling, and Twilight had to let the witch go when she finally noticed her garlic necklace. Greatly insulted, Zecora sat back down with a huff.

"You are so caught up in the past, although your future is bright and vast, that you refuse to move forward, and as a result heading toward a path of death and destruction. Don't fall prey to this seduction."

"I won't," Twilight growled. "Which is I'm not going to give into Phoenix's tricks. She's not going to stop me from finding and destroying the Sirens."

The zebra shook her head sadly. "So young, so hurt. It's not too late

to divert from this endless and dangerous road. Unfortunately, I am not the one to goad."

The unicorn groaned in annoyance. "Thanks for nothing."

Turning on her hoof, she stomped out of the witch's hut, even more frustrated than she was before she came.

"Oh, domnişoară!" Sassy Saddles exclaimed when Scootaloo came out from behind the screen. "It is so *you* !"

The filly, who was now all nice and clean, gazed down unsurely at her ensemble, which was a dark blue velvet gown decorated with lace.

"Ugh, it's so itchy!" she said, tugging at the collar and looking up at Fluttershy. "Do you rich mares really wear this stuff *all* the time?"

Fluttershy grinned awkwardly. "Apparently so."

"Sorry, lady," Scootaloo said to the dressmaker. "It's nice and all, but it's not really… *me* . Plus I'm not really a fan of blue."

"But this isn't blue!" Sassy insisted. "This is *zaffre* !"

The filly blinked. "Is that even a word?"

"Perhaps we should find something simpler," Fluttershy suggested.

"But this is the latest fashion!" said the unicorn.

"I don't wanna be *fashionable* ," Scootaloo snorted. "I just wanna keep *warm* ! And not be scratching my skin all the time."

Sassy Saddles rolled her eyes. "I'll see if I have anything in the back."

Even though she hadn't asked, the filly followed her into the workshop. She gasped when she saw a particular gown on a mannequin, looking just her size.

"What about *that* one?"

Sassy looked at the gown in question. "That? That dress is incomplete. We still have to pin the pattern down."

"Can I try it on?"

"But it isn't finished…"

" *Please* ?" Scootaloo begged, opening her eyes as widely and pleadingly as she could.

While the filly's gaze did not sway her, Sassy could not deny that the customer was always right, so she allowed her to try it on.

"Thank you for helping me with this," Fluttershy told the dressmaker while Scootaloo changed.

"It is nothing," Sassy said with a bright smile. "I'm always willing to help with the less fortunate."

"And thank you for letting her use your bathing tub."

"Yes, well, can't get dirt on the gowns now, can we?"

"It's a perfect fit!" Scootaloo exclaimed as she hopped out from behind the screen.

She did a twirl to show off the gown. It was orange, darker than her fur, and though it was simple with no intricate pattern, Fluttershy had to admit it suited her. Sassy led the filly to the mirrors and she spun around to observe herself from all angles.

"I love it!" she said, running her hooves along the fabric. "What's this made of? It's soft."

"It's just plain cotton," Sassy replied.

"It's warm too! It's perfect! Can I wear it out?"

"Certainly. Lady Fluttershy, you can pay up front."

When the dressmaker left, Fluttershy took a moment to watch

Scootaloo. She looked so happy in her new dress and was probably feeling like a new princess. The thought made her smile. But she also seemed agitated. She was looking back at Fluttershy's companions, who were browsing through the shop, keeping a safe distance from the mirrors.

"Domnişoară," Scootaloo whispered.

"You can call me Fluttershy, sweetie," the mare assured her.

"Yeah, sure, whatever. Can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure, what is it?"

The filly gestured for her to come closer and lowered her voice further. "Those three ponies, they are not what they seem."

"Oh," Fluttershy giggled, knowing who she was referring to. "Don't mind them. They may not be the most agreeable ponies, but they are harmless."

"That's just the thing. I get this weird feeling when I'm around them. They can't be trusted."

"It's alright, Scootaloo. I know they are a bit…prejudiced, but I'll make sure they stay polite."

"No, you don't get it! They're not even…"

"My lady!" Trenderhoof called. "Doamnă Saddles here is wondering when you're going to pay."

"I'll be right there!" Fluttershy took Scootaloo's hoof. "Come on. Let's pay for your dress so we can get lunch."

Scootaloo was about to protest, but she could feel Trenderhoof's suspicious gaze on her. It wouldn't be wise to warn Fluttershy while he and his posse were around. Their hearing was too sharp. Did he recognize her from the tavern? Was he aware of what she had witnessed? Did he suspect that she knew what he was?

Fluttershy would be safe as long as she wore the charm, but

Scootaloo figured she herself should take refuge with Zecora tonight. No home was better protected than hers.

"Ha!" Discord said as he slammed down his cards to reveal two kings and three queens. "Royal flush! Beat *that* !"

Angel smirked and dropped his four aces into view.

"What?! But how…? I was *cheating* too!"

The rabbit let out a series of sharp squeaks, as if he were snickering. Discord narrowed his eyes.

"I demand a rematch, you little devil!"

But he paused when he heard voices coming down the hall. Angel, with his keen rabbit ears, heard them too.

"You sure you'll find your earring in here, domnişoară?" said a voice which Discord recognized to belong to the maid who had come earlier.

"Lady Fluttershy specifically said in her letter that she had left it on her vanity table," said a more familiar voice which was Twilight's.

"Quick!" Discord whispered hastily to Angel. "Spread the cards around so it looks like you were making mischief!"

The rabbit huffed at the idea of him getting into trouble, but seeing that there was no other alternative, he began making a mess of their game while Discord slid under the bed.

"I'll just be a minute," Twilight said as the door was opened.

"Oh, goodness!" Coco gasped when she saw Angel in the middle of the card pile. She rushed to pick up the bunny. "What is the matter with you today, Angel? First that mess in the parlor and now this?"

"You know how playful animals can be," Twilight said as she pretended to search the vanity. "Hmm, I can't seem to find my

earring."

"It must be on the floor somewhere," the maid said as she struggled to keep the rabbit still. "Silly Angel could have knocked it over."

"Yes, good idea!"

Twilight scanned the floor until she came to the bed. When she was certain Coco wasn't looking, she set down her basket. A red snake with yellow eyes, whom she knew to be her master, slithered inside, concealing himself beneath a white cloth. Smiling, Twilight picked up the basket and then withdrew from it a pearl earring.

"Found it!" she said, showing it to the maid. "I'll just let myself out."

"Take care, domnişoară!" Coco called before scolding the rabbit. "You're going to get me sacked one of these days!"

As Twilight trotted down the hall, she glanced around and lifted the basket to her eyelevel.

"That was *very* reckless of you, Master! You could've been caught!"

Discord poked his scaly head out. "But I didn't."

"And to be in Fluttershy's bedchamber all night! It's just shameful!"

"Oh please, we didn't do anything!" He paused. "Alright so maybe we kissed a lot but we didn't go any further than that!"

"Nevertheless, you need to be more careful! If this happens again, I might not be able to come to your…"

She stopped suddenly, her eyes going wide. Looking all around, she sniffed the air.

"What is it?" Discord asked.

"Strange," she muttered. "I thought I…" She shook her head. "Never mind. Let's just get back to the castle before your transformation wears off."

After lunch and a trip to the marketplace, Fluttershy and Scootaloo parted ways at the town square. Trenderhoof, Sunset and Bulk were waiting a few meters away, the count keeping a close eye on the filly.

"You sure this is enough?" Fluttershy asked as Scootaloo examined the burlap sack of food.

"It's *more* than enough! I won't go hungry again! Well, at least for a week."

Scootaloo now wore her new gown and a purple shawl which Fluttershy had also bought for extra warmth. She still had her red kerchief to cover her head and her garlic necklace. She made a mental note to get a fresh one from Zecora later.

"You've been awfully nice to me, Fluttershy," she said sweetly.

"I wish there was more I could do for you," Fluttershy said sadly. "But Auntie wouldn't allow me to take you home."

"Aw, I'll be okay. I still got my corner at the tavern."

"But should you need anything else, anything at all, my house is over there."

Scootaloo gawked at the house she was pointing to. "That really big mansion?! I knew you were rich, but *gosh* !"

"Yes. Just knock on the door and ask for me."

"Sure thing, and should *you* ever be in a fix, just whistle like this!"

Putting her hoof in her mouth, she blew out a long shriek.

"I'll remember," Fluttershy said with an amused smile.

The filly's face then grew serious as she glanced nervously at Trenderhoof's crew. "You be careful, okay Fluttershy?" She pointed to her sun pendant. "Keep this close to you, even when you sleep."

"Don't worry about me, Scootaloo. I'm worried about you. Will you be

getting enough food?"

"Hey, I'm used to being on the streets, even when Mom was alive."

The mare frowned in concern. "How old are you, Scootaloo?"

"Ten. Eleven in a few weeks."

This surprised Fluttershy. The girl was so small. She hadn't taken her to be any older than eight.

"Well," Scootaloo said with a shrug, "I best be off. Thanks for all your help, Fluttershy. This was the best day ever!" She surprised the mare again with a hug. "If I had a new mom, I'd want her to be just like you!"

Fluttershy was touched by this statement and happily returned Scootaloo's embrace. It was a warm feeling, holding the filly in her hooves. The poor thing was so small, so dear. Fluttershy wanted to take her home and ensure that she was properly taken care of, if her aunt wasn't so against Romanes.

"See you around?" Scootaloo said as she drew away.

"Yes," Fluttershy said, waving. "See you! And take care of yourself!"

"I will!"

Casting one last cautious glance at Trenderhoof, the filly galloped off and Fluttershy returned to her companions.

"You have a way with children, I see," Trenderhoof observed.

"I…hadn't really thought about it," Fluttershy said, looking back to where Scootaloo had gone.

"Great," Sunset grunted. "Now that the urchin's gone, can we *please* go back to the house? All this charity work's making me nauseous."

As they walked back to the mansion, Fluttershy's thoughts lingered on her day with Scootaloo. She had never spent much time with foals, having been cooped up in Starlight's mansion all her life.

Clothing and feeding Scootaloo hadn't been that different from taking care of Angel, only she had been able to talk back. She was a delightful little filly and for a moment, Fluttershy had felt like a mother.

That was when she came to a startling realization. She had never been quite certain of what she wanted, like whether or not she wanted to get married as her aunt so desired. Even with her recent relationship with Discord, she hadn't been sure if marriage was something she wished to pursue. Now she wanted something, something that most mares yearned for at her age, something that, upon reflection, could be problematic.

She wanted foals.

***Bună dimineaţa* = "Good morning" (can't remember if I've done that one already)**

I had to look up how Victorian women dressed. Not sure how that would work for ponies actually.

Is It Enough?

When Applejack entered Discord's chamber, the draconequus was looking in the mirror Twilight had enchanted, examining his reflection.

"Master, I need to talk to ya about somethin'."

"Better make it quick, Applejack," he said as he wetted his finger to slick back his mane. "I'm meeting with Fluttershy soon."

She winced. "That's…what I need to talk to ya about."

"What is it?" he asked as he picked at his teeth with his talon.

Applejack took a deep breath. "This…thing ya have with Fluttershy…it has to stop."

Discord rolled his eyes. "If this is about the night you saw us kissing out on the patio, *she* kissed *me* , alright?"

"I'm not talkin' about *that* kiss. I know what you've been doin' with her. I saw ya in her bedroom a couple nights ago."

He snapped around and narrowed his gaze at her. "Have you been *spying* on us?"

"I just wanted to make sure you were bein' responsible! But when I saw ya embracin' her near her bed…"

"Sweet Darkness, Applejack!" Discord exclaimed, throwing up his paw and claw in exasperation. "If you're insinuating that Fluttershy and I have been making love, you're *greatly* mistaken! That kissing you saw, that's all we've been doing!"

He snapped the mirror away and conjured up a window. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a lady waiting for me."

His cape swished around his body as he turned and headed for the window. Applejack stared at him, hating herself but what she was

about to say.

"How long do ya think it'll last?"

Pausing, he craned his neck towards her. "What?"

She chose her words carefully. "This relationship, with Fluttershy, how long do ya think it'll last?"

He scoffed. "Forever, until the end of time. We're destined for each other."

"But does she even love ya?"

"Of course she does!" He smiled proudly. "She told me so herself!"

"But will that love still last," she winced, "after she's been turned?"

Discord was silent for a moment. "Of…of course! By the time she asks me to change her, her love would be a hundred times stronger than it is now!"

Applejack shook her head. "I don't like this, Master. You've known this from the start. Ya promised me she wouldn't suffer the same fate as me, that ya wouldn't take advantage…"

He groaned. "For crying out loud, Applejack! I am *not* Tenderheart! I would *never* take advantage of Fluttershy! Everything we've done, it was all with her permission!"

"But ya are! Even if she's willin', you're using her feelings for ya against her!"

"You're wrong," he said, pointing his finger firmly at her. "She *wants* to be with me!"

"Only because she's so in love she isn't thinkin' straight! Don't ya remember how Rarity felt about Tenderheart before he…?"

"This is different! When I drink Fluttershy's blood, I won't leave her to die in the woods! And I *certainly* won't take her virginity while she is vulnerable!"

"So you're just gonna take her life away? Have her sacrifice everything she's ever known just to be with *you* ?"

"I won't be taking her life! I'll be *renewing* it! She'll get to live forever, with *me* giving her all the love she deserves and more!"

Her eyes began filling with blood. "But will that be enough for her?"

"Of course it will! It will be enough because it is what she will want!"

Not wanting to discuss this any further, he turned away and prepared to turn into a bat, but before he could cast the spell, Applejack dealt her next card.

"What if it isn't?"

His fingers paused, mid-snap. "W-What do you mean?"

She sighed heavily. "What if she doesn't want to become a vampire? Have ya talked about it?"

Fluttershy's concerns about drinking animals' blood began echoing in his brain.

"She…she has plenty of time to change her mind! I can wait a year or…or two…"

"How about another millennium?"

He gulped. "It won't be *that* long. She loves me. She just needs time to…"

"Discord," Applejack said, taking a cautious step forward, "just because Fate decrees that the two of you are to be together, doesn't necessarily mean that's the path Fluttershy's gonna choose. Suppose you wait, suppose ya keep seein' her, suppose ya keep askin'. Suppose she never says yes. Will ya still go after her?"

A lump caught in his throat as he struggled to put his thoughts into words, but deep down, he knew Applejack had a point. These had been concerns of his for quite a while now. He loved Fluttershy, and she loved him. He told himself that that was all that mattered.

Creatures in love were supposed to be together forever, and though it would take time, that would happen for him and Fluttershy.

He tried ignoring his servant and was about to make another attempt to leave when she spoke again.

"I can't tell ya what to do, Master. I don't believe ya could ever hurt Fluttershy intentionally. But answer me this. Can ya stand to make a monster out o' her?"

Fluttershy as a vampire was an image he could not help but think of: her eyes reddening, her teeth becoming fangs. He imagined those fangs sinking into a corpse, perhaps into the rabbit she so dearly loved, and then coming up dripping with the rodent's blood. But Fluttershy was an innocent, so pure.

He really *couldn't* stand to see her become a monster.

"No," he said firmly. "You're wrong. It won't be like that. Just because *you* hate being a vampire doesn't mean *she* will! We *need* each other! When you find *your* mate, you'll understand!"

Applejack shut her eyes and breathed. "Do ya love her, Master?"

He glared at her in determination. "More than life itself!"

Opening her eyes, she gazed up at him. "If ya *really* loved her, you wouldn't condemn her to this fate."

He could not look at her anymore, so he transformed into a bat and flew off. Applejack hung her head sadly with a sigh.

"Please say you'll prove me wrong."

By the time Discord arrived at Fluttershy's, he had erased his recent argument with Applejack from his mind. The future was not important, only the present, and in this present moment he was to meet with the love his life. The window was open for him and Fluttershy was waiting.

" *Bună seara* , my angelic beauty," he said suavely. "Oh, it is torture to be away from you for so long!"

Fluttershy flinched at his puckered lips. "Discord, we need to…"

"Aren't you going to invite me in, darling?" he asked, opening his eyes slightly.

"Oh, yes, come in."

Giddily, he thrust himself into the room and towards her. She stopped him by putting her hoof to his lips.

"Discord," she said slowly. "Please. There's something I need to discuss with you."

Opening his eyes, he finally saw her apprehensive expression.

"Oh," he said, straightening up. "Certainly, dear. What's on your mind?"

"Well," she said with a gulp. "M-Maybe we should sit down."

Her tone gave him the impression that whatever she had to say wasn't going to be pleasant. As they sat down side-by-side, Fluttershy calmed herself with several deep breaths.

"Remind me again. How… *exactly* were you born?"

Not expecting that question, he blinked and said, "I told you. I don't know. I wasn't exactly paying attention when I was conceived."

"But you were born somehow. You know you had a mother…how *did* you know?"

He shrugged. "Sombra was passing by a house and saw me being thrown out."

She repositioned herself so that she was facing him. "But you had a mother. Are you certain she was mortal? She could've been a vampire, right?"

Gritting his teeth, he replied, "If she were mortal I could at least understand why she abandoned me."

"What about your father?"

He stiffened. "My *father* ?"

"Could *he* have been a vampire?" she asked hopefully. "Maybe…he was a draconequus like you and…"

"What's with all these questions about how I came to be? You know I cannot answer them."

Fluttershy lowered her head and took another deep breath before looking back up at him.

"I want children."

He froze. "W-What?"

"Well," she said, twiddling her hooves. "You see, this afternoon I found this Romane filly and…"

Discord did not hear her story. His mind was dwindling on those three words: *I want children.*

He loved Fluttershy. He would've done anything for her. But of course, she had to name the one thing he couldn't give her.

It wasn't just the fact that it was impossible. He himself had been brought up by a vampire, who had later adopted a mortal filly. But Discord knew nothing of foals. He used to devour them for breakfast! Would he even be able to feed it? What did foals eat? Should he spoil the child or discipline it?

While he had always considered the girls his family, and they had sometimes referred to him as their paternal figure, Discord couldn't see himself raising a foal. What child would want *him* as a father? Not only was he a vampire, but a *monster* ! Even if the child didn't mind his looks, how would it react to his past? Not all ponies were as tolerant as Fluttershy.

The sound of his name brought him back to the present.

"So you see, Discord," Fluttershy continued, "I *must* know." She took his paw. "Whether I'm a mortal or a vampire, *is* it possible for us to have a child together?"

As he gazed into her large, pleading eyes, he did not know how to answer. He hated to disappoint her, but he also couldn't give her any false hope.

"N-No, Fluttershy," he stammered. "I highly doubt it's possible."

Her face fell as her cheeks lost their usual rosiness.

"Oh my darling," he whispered, stroking her mane. "I'm so sorry…"

"Don't be," she murmured as she stared blankly at the wall. "It's not your fault. It's just that…when I had that filly in my hooves, I felt… *responsible* for her. I wanted to…to keep holding her, to care for her, and to get nothing but love in return."

He could understand that feeling perfectly well, as that was how he felt towards her. "Still, I am sorry. I'm sorry I cannot give you children." This statement seemed to make her sadder. Seeing Angel's empty bed, he had an idea. "Hey! You'll still have your rabbit! That's sort of the same thing, right?"

He immediately knew he had said the wrong thing when Fluttershy's eyes widened and her face paled with dread.

"Oh no, Angel! I…I hadn't thought of what would happen to him if I… Would he even still like me?"

Discord hesitated to answer, for all animals instinctively feared vampires. "Of…of course he would! Who *wouldn't* like you?"

But she was still hyperventilating. "Good god! What if I end up *killing* him?!"

Panicking, he wrapped his arms around her in a tight squeeze. "No, no, no, no, no! No, you won't *kill* him! He's your buddy! And you couldn't hurt anyone!"

"But Discord," she said, looking up at him in terror, "what about Pinkie Pie? *She* wouldn't hurt any pony! Yet when she was changed…"

"T-That won't happen! She wasn't herself!"

"So…I won't be *myself* ?"

"Fluttershy…"

"Am I going to become a killer?!"

"No! I'll do all the hunting for you! You won't have to…"

"But what if I lose control like Pinkie Pie?"

"You won't! I'll help you! I…"

She gasped suddenly. "What if we *do* have children?! What if we adopt them and I lose control around *them* ?! I could kill our children!"

"Fluttershy!" he exclaimed, grabbing her shoulders and giving her a firm shake. "Look at me!"

Her breathing slowed and she looked at him, though her eyes still held fear.

"None of that will matter," he said assuredly as his claw moved to her face. "The only thing that will matter is that we'll be together. Forever." He gently stroked her cheek. "We won't need children or pets, just each other. And our love."

He glanced at her parted lips. "Now, why we put this whole argument behind us and go to bed?"

He leaned forward, but she flinched away from his claw and his lips. This action made him frown in concern.

"What's wrong?"

She said nothing.

"Darling?"

He could feel her slipping from his hold. He gently tried to pull her back but she shook him off. Hanging her head, she said the words he had dreaded to hear.

"I don't think I can do this anymore, Discord."

It was as if he were truly dead, for every function in his body seemed to stop, freezing him in place. Her words rang in his ears so loudly, he couldn't even think.

"I-I'm so sorry," she stuttered. "I just…can't be with you."

Moving his lips took a lot of effort. "B-B-But…I *love* you."

She looked up at him with teary eyes. "And I love *you* , Discord, but…I also love life."

"But you'd still be alive!" he said quickly.

"But not really, right? I won't be breathing, I won't be able to have children, I won't be able to die…"

"Exactly! That's the best part! You won't be able to die! You'd be immortal!"

Fluttershy lowered her gaze. "Do I have to be a vampire to be with you?"

He blinked. "But of course! Do you think I could stand to watch you wither and die and then live on the rest of eternity without you?"

"But Discord, I *want* to grow old! I want to have a family! I don't want to stay young forever. I…I want to live. I didn't realize I wanted that until today."

Scowling, he crossed his arms. "And I suppose *Trenderhoof* can give you that?"

She raised her head. "Discord, he has nothing to do with…"

" *Doesn't* he?!" he snapped angrily. "After all, he's handsome! On top of that, he has a pulse! He can give you lots of children! But can he give you *love* ?!" He pressed his paw and claw to his chest. "My heart may not beat, Fluttershy, but no one, I repeat *no one* , can give you the love I have given you! Isn't that better than…than foals?"

"What about adoption? Sombra raised you, didn't he? Perhaps we could find some orphan and…"

"Oh, yes!" he exclaimed, pushing himself from the bed. "Raising a young mortal foal in a house full of bloodthirsty vampires! He or she will turn out *great* !"

She frowned further. "Do…do you not *want* children?"

He turned around and pointed to himself. "Can you *see* me as a father, Fluttershy?"

Narrowing her eyes, she said, "So…it's not the matter of not having the ability, but not *wanting* to even *try* ?"

Putting his paw to his head, he said, "Fluttershy, I…I just don't see how raising a child, a mortal one for that matter, would end well for us or the child."

Tears streamed down her cheek, but she firmly raised her chin and said, "Well, if you do not think we can thrive as parents," she turned away, "then perhaps we will not thrive as husband and wife."

Fearing that he would lose her, Discord dropped to his knees. "Please, Fluttershy! Don't leave me!"

"I'm not the only fish in the sea, Discord," she said through a cracked voice. "Y-You're immortal. You could…find some pony else."

"Some pony else? Fluttershy, there *is* no pony else! Didn't you know? Vampires mate for *life* ! Meaning they only fall in love *once* !"

She faced him in shock. "What?"

"It's true," he said, looking at her pleadingly. "Vampires are paired with only one being in their afterlife. Why do you think in the thousand years I've lived that there's been no pony before you? It's because I am destined for *one* pony and that is *you* !"

She began breathing heavily. "S-So…I have no…choice in the matter?"

"No, no! Have I ever touched you without your saying so?"

"Which means I don't have to be a vampire."

He choked. "You would do that to me? Torture me by aging? It's been torturous enough watching you grow older with every passing second!"

She stood. "So *I* am to make all the sacrifices?"

"No, that's not what I…"

"You're asking me," she said as she began pacing, "to give up my mortality, my chance to have a family, to make myself into a creature who feeds off blood, to force myself to eat… *animals* ! And why? Just so *you* don't have to watch me die?!"

"Yes!" he barked desperately. "You're my *everything* , Fluttershy! I *need* you in my life!"

She blinked. "What did you say?"

"I *need* you! I *need* you to be with me!"

That word. That horrible, horrible word that had ruled her life. She *needed* to be a lady. She *needed* to marry a noble. She *needed* to obey the laws of society. She could hear her aunt and tutors saying that word over and over. And she had done everything, not because she had wanted to, but because it was her duty.

And that's what her relationship with Discord had been all along. A duty.

She could no longer back her tears. "You can't make me into

something I'm not, Discord."

He opened his mouth, but then he remembered his conversation with Applejack.

Can ya stand to make a monster out o' her?

"Discord," she said softly. "I *do* love you, but…"

"It's not enough."

He gazed at her. She was so beautiful, so pure. He could not taint that. Even if she changed her mind and chose to be with him, the decision would eat away at her soul until she was nothing but an empty shell. She would do ghastly deeds for the rest of eternity, and she would rightfully blame him.

Applejack was right. Fluttershy was right. It was not his place or any pony else's to choose her fate. That right was solely Fluttershy's.

And now, she wanted to be away from him.

He sighed in relent. "You're right." He choked on his words. "How… how foolish I was to believe that you…" He shook his head. "I know better than anyone how agonizing the life of a vampire can be. I never had the chance to truly live, but I thought with you…"

Discord stopped himself. There was no use in trying to coax her back into his arms.

"I shall leave you then," he murmured, going to the window. "Nevermore will I trouble you with my presence."

Watching him go made her heart ache. She didn't want him to leave, but the cost of keeping him was too great.

"I-I…" she said through her quivering lip. "I wish…"

He sighed at the window. "I know." He turned to her. "I will never forget you, Fluttershy."

She smiled sadly. "It would be impossible to forget you."

He nodded as he took one last long look at her. "Goodbye…my dearest love."

He shoved off into the night. For a long while Fluttershy stared at the open window, watching the wind blow the curtains surrounding the empty space. Covering her face, she rushed to her bed and sobbed. In the distance, she could hear Discord roaring like a wounded animal.

This is always the hardest part for me to write. But it's always the most necessary.

The Farmer and the Poet

TRIGGER WARNING: REFERENCES TO SUICIDE AND SEXUAL ASSAULT!

Early the next morning, Rainbow Dash, Pinkie Pie, Rarity and Applejack were sparring in the gymnasium. Twilight walked in to see Pinkie sitting on Dash's stomach and Applejack holding Rarity in a headlock.

"Hey girls?" Twilight said. "Have you noticed anything…off about the Master?"

Before answering, Rainbow flipped Pinkie onto her back. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, I was patrolling last night and saw him come home looking distressed. I went to his room to ask what was wrong but he had shut himself up."

Applejack released Rarity. "Did he say anything?"

"Nothing, except that he wanted to be left alone. He sounded so… broken. I'm worried about him."

Rainbow yelped as Pinkie bucked her off.

"Aw he's just in another one of his moods!" Pinkie said. "Let's all go and cheer him up!"

And so the five of them went up to their master's room together. Twilight knocked on the door.

"Master? Are you in there?"

"Hey is something burning?" Pinkie asked, sniffing the air.

The others took a few whiffs and their eyes widened in terror as they

reached the same conclusion.

"He wouldn't," Applejack said.

But they could hear the crackling of fire inside. Twilight hastily tried the door.

"It's locked!"

"Move aside!"

The mares pressed themselves against the walls as Rainbow flew back and charged for the door. It broke apart instantly. They all gasped at the sight of their master standing before an open window with his arms spread out in surrender, the sun beams sparking tiny flames on his flesh.

"Master!" the mares cried.

They didn't waste another second. Rainbow, Applejack and Pinkie leapt at Discord, tackling him out of the light while Rarity conjured up curtains to cover the window.

"NOOOO!" Discord screamed, struggling to break free from the girls' hooves.

"Master, calm down!" Applejack commanded.

"No! You ruined it! It would've all been over! I would've been…"

Twilight cut him off by summoning a bucket of water to douse the flames. Panting from exhaustion, Discord relaxed, giving the mares the opportunity to release him.

"How *could* you?" Rainbow scolded.

"You swore you wouldn't do this again!" Rarity exclaimed.

"Again?" Twilight asked.

"Not long after Applejack was turned, he tried stepping out into the light."

Applejack scowled at the draconequus. "Why, Master? Why would ya go and do a stupid thing like that?"

Discord sniffed as he curled up into a fetal position. "She doesn't want me."

" *Who* doesn't want you?" Rarity demanded.

"Fluttershy!" he shouted suddenly. "She doesn't want me anymore!"

Applejack's eyes widened. "Did you… *end* things with her?"

"I *had* to! She wants to live! *Really* live!" He began sobbing loudly. "Without my dearest love, I have no reason to continue."

Rainbow looked as if some pony had stabbed her with a stake.

"So," she choked, "you…you were just gonna… *leave* us here? As if… *we* weren't enough?"

Discord turned towards her and saw the blood in her eyes. "Oh, Dashie, I didn't mean…"

"You didn't think we'd care?!" she snapped, standing up. "If…if you were suddenly… *gone* ?! All these years, I've never left your side, Master! And you were just gonna…burst into flames without explanation?!"

"Oh, it's worse," Rarity snorted angrily as she levitated a piece of paper into view. "He left a note!"

Rainbow's eyes reddened. "A *note* ?! You thought a *note* was going to make this all better?! I…I can't believe you think so…so *little* of us! Like we're not important! But no! It's all about *Fluttershy* , isn't it?! You don't care about *us* !"

She stormed out of the room.

"Dashie!" Pinkie called, chasing after her.

Rarity glared down at Discord. "Are you happy now?"

She too followed the distressed pegasus, leaving Twilight and Applejack to tend to their master.

"What happened last night?" the unicorn asked.

Discord winced. "I…I went to Fluttershy's and…she said she wanted children."

Applejack and Twilight glanced at each other uneasily.

"I…I said it wasn't possible and…she said she just couldn't…be with me anymore."

"Wait," Applejack said. " *She* broke things off with *you* ?"

He nodded. "You see? She doesn't want me. The love of my life, the one I was supposed to spend the rest of eternity with…doesn't… want…me."

He sobbed into his knees and Twilight tenderly patted his head.

"Leave us," she told Applejack.

"Ya sure?"

The unicorn locked gaze with her. "I can handle him."

Applejack rose to her hooves and left the room.

"That," Twilight said, narrowing her eyes at her master, "was cowardice, Discord."

He buried his face in his paw and claw in shame. "I just…didn't want to suffer any longer. All my problems would've been solved."

"You would've been *dead* ! How would *that* have solved anything? Whatever happened with Fluttershy, she wouldn't have wanted you to take your own life!"

"Why not? She doesn't want me in her life anymore, so why should I go on living?"

Twilight sighed and shook her head in pity. "I know how you feel,

Master. When Flash was killed, I felt like I'd lost everything, like my soul was incomplete without him. Like you, I even thought about ending it all."

Discord lowered his paw and claw so he could see the determination in her face.

"But Flash wouldn't have wanted me to give up. He would've wanted me to keep going, so that I could find his killers and see that they were brought to justice."

"But your love *died* , Twilight," Discord said, wiping his face with his claw. "Fluttershy *left* me."

"That doesn't mean she doesn't still care for you. If you kill yourself, she's going to blame herself for the rest of her life. Do you want to do that to her?"

He sniffed. "I…I didn't think that she'd…"

"No. You didn't."

"But if I am to never love again, what *am* I to do?"

Twilight smiled as she took his claw. "You still have us."

"Not forever. You girls will eventually find your own soulmates and might leave me for them. Already Rarity has found hers. It's only a matter of time."

"Even if that happened, we wouldn't leave you behind. You've done us all favors, Master, regardless of what you may think. We're more than just friends. We're family."

Discord gazed up at the unicorn gratefully. Her words had soothed him somewhat, but his heart was still broken, and he didn't think it could ever be fully mended no matter how many friends surrounded him.

He was so exhausted from crying and Twilight sensed this.

"Do you want me to put you to sleep with useless, boring facts?"

He smiled slightly and whimpered, "Yes, please."

Applejack found the others in Rainbow's room. The pegasus was crying in her coffin while Rarity patted her on the back and Pinkie tried making silly faces to cheer her up.

"He didn't mean what he said, Rainbow," Rarity said assuredly.

"But it's true!" Rainbow wailed. "He doesn't care about us enough to stay!"

"I think it's partly my fault."

The mares turned to Applejack in the doorway.

"What are you talking about?" Rarity asked suspiciously.

The orange mare hung her head. "Last night, before Discord went to see Fluttershy, I told him to…end things with her."

Pinkie gasped and Rainbow's jaw dropped. Rarity's eyes reddened in fury.

"You did *what* ?!"

"He had to!" Applejack insisted. "What he was doin' to her was selfish!"

"What *he* was doing was selfish?!" The unicorn stood defiantly. "What about *you* ? *You* were trying to drive a wedge between him and Fluttershy, all because of something that happened to *you* !"

"So you're sayin' havin' her become a vampire just to be with him would've been completely selfless?"

"Of *course* not! But if we are completely selfless, Applejack, we're never going to get *anything* we want! Especially when it comes to love!"

"What are ya talkin' about?"

Rarity groaned. "Isn't it *obvious* ?! When you fall in love, and you pursue that love, you are only thinking of yourself and how much you want that pony. Hence, you are selfish. But if you don't pursue them at all because you do not think you are good enough for them, then you are selfless. But how will you *ever* move forward in a relationship if you're not a little selfish?"

Applejack was reminded of Spike and how she never pursued him. But that was different. She was protecting Spike from a terrible fate. She scowled angrily at the unicorn.

"And what do *you* know about relationships? Last time you were in one, ya threw yourself at the colt the minute he proposed to ya!"

Pinkie and Rainbow gasped in horror. Applejack knew she had cut too deep when Rarity's fangs started sprouting.

"At least I've *been* in one! But *you* ," she advanced towards Applejack, poking her in the chest, "have *no* right to interfere with other ponies' affairs!"

"I was just tryin' to protect Fluttershy!" Applejack said. "But apparently my advice wasn't needed as *Fluttershy* was the one to break things off with *him* ! She doesn't *want* to be a vampire, Rarity!"

"But it's thanks to *you* that the Master's not going to even fight for her anymore!"

"Wouldn't ya do the same for Fancy Pants if *he* didn't wanna be a vampire?"

Rarity's eyes returned to their natural blue and her fangs shrank into her mouth. Her shoulders slumped as she sighed.

"I don't know where my relationship with Fancy Pants will go. I don't know if he'll even still like me when he finds out what I am and what I've done." She raised her head boldly. "But that doesn't mean I'm going to stop trying. However, if he truly wishes me gone and no longer loves me, then yes, I *will* let him be, but it will be *my* choice, not some pony else's."

Applejack lowered her head. "I know. I know I shouldn't've meddled.

I knew the moment I saw Discord roastin' himself to death. He's not strong like you and me, Rarity. He needs Fluttershy."

She looked up as Rarity placed a sympathetic hoof on her shoulder. "So then, what are you going to do about it?"

Applejack narrowed her eyes in resolve and straightened up. "I'm gonna set things right."

Fluttershy refused to get out of bed that morning. She had told her aunt she was feeling under the weather. A cold cup of tea and bowl of soup stood on her side table. Under normal circumstances, Angel would've eaten the soup right up. As much as he despised Discord, the rabbit hated seeing his owner so upset.

He leapt onto the bed and found her in a sorry state. Her mane was tangled, her eyes were crusty and she was curled up into a tight ball with her sheets. Angel hopped over to her and snuggled in the crook of her foreleg.

"Oh, Angel," Fluttershy murmured, stroking her pet's fur. "Did I do the right thing?"

He nuzzled against her in response.

"You should've seen him. He was so…broken. I love him, Angel, but…" She buried her face in her pillow. "Oh, I just don't know what I want anymore!"

There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?"

"It is me, domnişoară," said Coco's voice.

"Come in."

The maid opened the door a crack and peered inside. "There's a messenger for you, from the Count Discord."

Fluttershy moaned tiredly. "Tell them I am not well and do not wish to see any pony today."

"I did, my lady, but she was so insistent. She swore she would not leave the doorstep until you would speak with her."

Lifting her head slightly, Fluttershy asked, "What did this mare look like?"

"Earth mare, orange coat, blonde mane. And she has a peculiar accent, madam. I think she's from the country."

Fluttershy sat up in interest. "Send her up here. I'll only be a moment."

Coco nodded and shut the door. Fluttershy got out of bed and put on a green silken robe. A few minutes later, Applejack was knocking at the door. Fluttershy answered and moved aside to let her in.

"To be honest," the pegasus said before shutting the door, "I was not expecting *you* to come."

"Understood," Applejack said, sitting in one of the divans.

Fluttershy sat in the chair across from her. "If Discord sent you to convince me to reconsider, tell him I need time to…"

"Discord doesn't know I'm here."

The pegasus blinked.

"Yeah," Applejack scoffed. "Thought you'd be surprised. After all, I'm the last pony who'd try to get ya to change yerr mind. But first," she faced Fluttershy, "I want you to tell me *exactly* what happened last night."

Still aghast, Fluttershy took a deep breath. "He…he came to me and…I told him I wanted children. He told me it wasn't possible for vampires, and I can understand that, but when I suggested adoption he…he didn't think we could handle it." She sniffed as she wiped away some oncoming tears. "And I…I told him that…that it was all too much for me to give up and…"

Applejack hung her head. "You weren't ready to give up yerr life for love."

Fluttershy covered her face with her hooves. "I didn't want to *hurt* him. It's just that…all my life I've done whatever I was told, fulfilled whatever obligation was set before me. When he told me that I was the only mare he'd ever love, that…that he *needed* me… I can't have him *needing* me, Applejack! All that time we were together I thought for the first time ever, some pony wanted me for *me* , not because they needed my money or my title. But now that I know he *needs* me, I feel like…I have no other choice."

"And what makes ya think want and need are necessarily different? Sometimes, they can be interchangeable. Every pony needs food to live but no pony doesn't wanna eat, right? Of course Discord *wants* ya in the sense that ya make him happy, but he also *needs* ya in the sense that…he just can't live without ya.

"And that's why I'm here," Applejack said with a wince. "He…he tried to kill himself today."

Fluttershy's eyes widened in horror. " *What* ?!"

The earth mare nodded. "We found him in his room, standin' in front of an open window. In the sun."

"He did *what* ?!"

"It's true." Her face grew solemn. "It's not the first time he's tried somethin' like this, ya know? We once caught him steppin' out the front door during the day."

"Is he alright?"

"We managed to get him in time, but…I've never seen him so… *broken* ."

Fluttershy stared blankly at the carpet. "I…I knew he would be upset but…I didn't think he'd…"

"I know. And I blame myself for it."

She faced her again. "What?"

Applejack sighed. "I tried convincin' him last night to break things off with ya. I didn't want ya to become a vampire like us."

"Oh, Applejack, it's not your fault. *I* was the one to end things. You had nothing to do with *my* decision."

"But if I hadn't talked to him, he probably wouldn't've let ya go." She straightened up. "Now, it's time I make up for my mistakes. I can't guarantee I'll change yerr mind, but if ya really wanna know the reason I've acted this way," she closed her eyes, "it's time ya heard my story."

At last, Fluttershy was to receive the last piece of the puzzle to the vampires' lives, and after what little she had heard of Applejack, she wasn't sure she was prepared for what she was about to hear.

Taking a deep breath, Applejack began. "Twenty years ago, I was livin' on an apple farm with my Granny Smith, by big brother Big Macintosh and my lil' sister Apple Bloom. My parents died not long after Apple Bloom was born, and with Big Mac and Granny Smith runnin' the farm, I pretty much had to raise her on my own.

She smiled slightly. "Oh, she was a sweet lil' thing. While I'd never really been interested in romance, it was because of my sister that I someday wanted to raise a family of my own, and we'd all live together on the apple farm, buckin' apples, bakin' pies, tendin' to the livestock. No doubt about it, I had everythin' I could possibly want right there on that farm."

Despair overtook her expression. "Then one day, this fella came to the farm. He called himself Travelhay. He said he was a travelin' writer and asked me to be his," she gagged, " *muse* . I told him I wasn't interested, but he kept comin' back and tryin' to court me. It started gettin' annoyin' and I told him to leave me alone. When that didn't work, Big Mac threatened to get his musket. Thing was, even though my family wanted to see me settled, they could tell the fella was bad news." She sighed. "Boy, were they ever right."

Bloody tears formed in her eyes as she continued. "One night, I was

comin' home from the market. I should've been more careful. I should've known better than to go out alone at night. I should've spent the night at an inn, but…I was just so sure of myself.

"Travelhay met me on the road, just on the outskirts of the forest. He told me it was my last chance, and that if I rejected him again, he would have to teach me a lesson. I thought nothin' of his threat. He was so skinny, I thought I could take him if he tried anything. So I kept on walkin' and…" She bit her lip. "He…he grabbed me from behind and tackled me to the ground. I tried fightin' back but he was stronger than I thought. And then…"

She began hyperventilating. "He…he changed. Oh, if I had listened to Granny's tales about vampires! I would've brought garlic with me! He…he started liftin' my skirt and said, 'It's time you learned what happens when you say no to stallions.'"

She was silent for a long while as she wiped at her tears. "I'd never felt so helpless in my life. In one instant, every bit of happiness in me was gone, just like that. Just when I thought it couldn't get any worse, he…he took my foreleg and bit hard into it."

She cradled her right foreleg, and Fluttershy only now noticed the faded crescent-shaped teeth marks.

"Then he bit into his own foreleg, enough to spew blood. He tried to get me to drink but I kept turnin' my head away. He was so mad I thought he was gonna kill me right then and there, but then he was suddenly pulled off me. It was Discord. He was wrestlin' that no-good bastard like crazy! Travelhay was so spooked, he flew off.

"I thought Discord had only saved me so he could finish me off, but instead he asked if I was okay and looked at my wounds. Seein' the bite, he said there was nothin' he could do to stop the venom from turnin' me into a vampire, but that he could offer me sanctuary, help me with my changes, take me to mares who had gone through similar experiences, help me kill the bastard who had done this to me.

"Naturally I trusted him. He had saved my life." She snorted. "Well, if you can call *this* a life! Stayin' frozen forever, never able to have a

family, never to grow old with the ones you love." She sighed. "Then again, I could've ended up Travelhay's slave mare had Discord not come then.

"I went with him, met Rarity and Rainbow. After talkin' with Rarity, we realized we'd been bitten by the same vampire. He had used a different name, but our descriptions matched. As for my family, I…I tried to keep in contact with 'em, but as they grew older and I stayed the same, I had to stop visitin' them."

Her cheeks were now streaked with blood. "My lil' Apple Bloom is all grown up, my brother has a family, and my granny…" She sniffed. "She might not make it through the winter."

She began sobbing, quietly, but without control. Fluttershy offered her a handkerchief, which Applejack used to blow her nose.

"Now ya know why I was always so cold with ya," she said once she had composed herself. "When Pinkie and Twilight were turned, I did nothin'. They knew what they were gettin' into. But you, you were in love. I thought…if Discord wasn't careful he might…unwittingly destroy everythin' that ya are. I thought he was bein' selfish, but now…now that he's let ya go I see that he really loves ya and that he would do anythin' for ya."

"Even take his life?" Fluttershy said quietly.

Applejack shook her head. "Don't feel like you're obligated to be with him. I don't know ya very well, Fluttershy, but it sounds like you've never really had to make many choices. I can't tell ya what to do, neither can Discord. But if ya *really* love him, if ya need and or want him as much as he does you, then you should go back to him. If not, then if you care for him at all you will at least comfort him so that he doesn't hurt himself again."

"Well," the pegasus murmured, "if he really *does* want me…"

She laid her hoof over Fluttershy's. "Never mind what *he* wants, Sugar Cube. This about what *you* want."

Applejack rose from her seat. "I've said my peace. Whatever choice

ya make, I'm not gonna try and stop ya this time."

And with that, she left Fluttershy alone with her thoughts. The pegasus didn't know what to do. Her heart was torn between her yearning for Discord and her yearning for a family. To have a choice was not something she was accustomed to. No pony had ever asked what *she* wanted. Now she had finally been asked.

And she did not know the answer.

Applejack was on the ground floor when she caught a whiff of something. The smell made her stop in her tracks, for it was very familiar and unpleasant and gave her an eerie sense of foreboding. She followed the scent into the drawing room and searched for its source.

"I thought I smelled apples in here."

She froze at the sound of the chilling voice. Traumatizing memories of the past came rushing back, leaving her momentarily paralyzed.

"What, no hello for an old friend?"

She knew who it was before she turned around.

"You."

Trenderhoof was leaning against the doorframe, smiling mischievously at her as he magically shut the door.

"Applejack," he said, slowly advancing. "After all these years." He sized her up. "You look well, for a forty-year-old vampire."

"Travelhay," she said in a voice barely above a whisper.

"Actually, I go by Count Trenderhoof now."

"Trenderhoof?" she murmured as she remembered the name of the count that was staying in this house. " *You're* Count Trenderhoof?"

"Surprise!" he exclaimed, gesturing towards himself. "As you can see, I've come a long way since last we met." He took another step. "And to think all this time I thought that monstrous beast in the woods had devoured you."

Upon hearing him insult her master, Applejack found some strength and narrowed her eyes menacingly at him.

"The only monstrous beast that was around that night was *you* !"

"Ooh," Trenderhoof breathed in amusement. "I see you're just as feisty as ever." He reached out his hoof. "I always liked that about you."

She slapped it away. "Touch me and you're dead!"

He sighed. "Difficult too. Didn't you learn your lesson last time?"

"I *learned* that you're even *more* of a pig than I took ya for! *You* haven't changed a bit either!"

"How *did* you survive?" Trenderhoof asked as he began circling her at a safe distance. "Did you fight off that creature by yourself?" He scoffed. "I doubt that. Perhaps you just got lucky. Oh well. I'd say it all turned out well for you. You serve the Count Discord now."

Applejack stiffened. "How'd ya know…?"

"I have my sources. But tell me. Are you his mistress or just one of his flunkies?"

She snorted. "Not *all* males are as pigheaded as *you* !"

"Really, Applejack? Is this the gratitude I get for…?"

"Gratitude?!" she snapped, facing him. "What do I *possibly* have to thank ya for?!"

"Why, I made you immortal. Your youth and beauty are preserved forever, thanks to me."

"Oh, sure, thank ya! Thank ya *ever* so much for takin' away my life,

my family, my *happiness* ! Don't think I don't know what you're doin' here! You're after Fluttershy, aren't ya?"

He chuckled. "Ever the sharp one."

"You're not gonna get her. She doesn't belong to ya!"

"And what are *you* going to do about it?"

"I'm gonna tell her what ya are!"

She marched to the door, but when it opened, the Dazzlings were blocking the way.

"Going somewhere?" Adagio asked innocently.

"It doesn't have to be this way, Applejack," Trenderhoof said, stalking towards her. "I really did like you. I wasn't going to *kill* you. I was going to make you my number one mistress. I would've set you above *all* my mares. If only you hadn't slipped through my hooves."

Applejack looked at the Dazzlings in disgust. "How can ya follow this bastard? Don't ya know he's just *usin'* ya?"

Aria shrugged. "Yeah, so?"

"We're evil, *duh* !" said Sonata.

"You should've seen us *before* we were turned," Adagio sneered. "Only difference now is that we're paid in blood instead of silver."

Applejack turned back to Trenderhoof. He was so close now that she was trapped between him and the Dazzlings. Her eyes reddened as she bared her fangs.

"Oh, you can fight us off, darling," Trenderhoof said with a knowing smile. "But the thing is, I am a respected citizen in this country and should some pony walk in, it'll look like murder. The walls are, in fact, very thin here. Oh, yes. Let's not forget the fact that the curtains are open and the sun is beaming into this room."

She glanced between him and the Dazzlings, realizing that he was

right.

"But you don't have to fight us," he said, slowly raising his hoof. "There's always room for one more in our…big happy family." He whispered in her ear. "We can finish what we started."

That set her off. In a swift motion she bit down on his hoof and ducked out under his foreleg.

"I already *have* a family," she said defiantly. "A *good* one. And you're not gonna take 'em away from me like ya did my real family. You might've ruined my life, Travelhay, Tenderheart, Trenderhoof, whatever ya call yourself! But ya made one big mistake!"

She stomped her hoof hard enough to crack the floor. "Ya made me *stronger* ! And I'm not gonna let ya ruin Fluttershy's life the way ya did mine! If ya even try, you can expect a whole lot o' hell from me *and* my friends!"

Trenderhoof scowled and crossed his hooves. "Make your threats, but you will not stop me from carrying out my plans, no matter how much I favored you in the past."

"Well then I guess I'll just have to make it harder for ya, because you know what?" she said as she stuck her muzzle in his face. "You don't rule over me anymore."

With a final huff, she pushed past the Dazzlings with her head held high. Trenderhoof held Sonata back.

"Let her go."

"But Master," Aria said. "Aren't you worried she's going to warn Lady Fluttershy?"

He shook his head. "She knows it's too risky. I can hear her out the door right now."

"What about Count Discord?" Adagio inquired. "She's sure to tell *him* ."

"Of course she is."

"So what do we do now?" Sonata asked.

Trenderhoof grinned cruelly as he casually brushed the dust off his jacket. "We'll just have to resort to Plan B."

Okay, so it wasn't as big a secret as I would've liked it to be. Originally I wanted to hide the fact that Trenderhoof was a vampire until now, but then I wouldn't have been able to explore Sunset's character and such.

Those of you who think Trenderhoof's evil for the sake of being evil, just you wait.

Rescue

I might've figured out the cause of my headaches. Turns out I need glasses. Too bad I don't get them until next week.

A thunderous ring filled the castle. Spike snapped awake from his nap and rushed into the hall, almost colliding with Rarity, Rainbow and Pinkie who were coming out of Rainbow's room. Twilight came running from the spiral stairwell, levitating Discord behind her, as he refused to get up.

"What's going on?" Spike asked.

"We don't know," Rainbow said. "Something must be up."

They arrived in the dining room where they found Applejack hastily pulling on the emergency bell rope.

"Applejack, what's all the hullaballoo?" Rarity inquired.

Applejack stopped her ringing and faced the others in panic. "You were right, Rarity. He's back. Trenderheart's back!"

"Who?" Pinkie said, cocking her head.

"I mean Tenderhay! Travelhoof! Ugh! *Him* , Rarity!"

Rarity gasped. "You've *seen* him!"

"Oh, I've *more* than just seen him! He and the Sirens tried to recruit me into their sick little group!"

"So he *is* working with the Sirens!" Twilight said.

"Oh, it gets worse. He's goin' by a new name now. Count Trenderhoof."

Still hovering in the air, Discord constricted towards her. "What?!"

"Trenderhoof…" Rarity said with a gasp. "Not the count staying at Fluttershy's?!"

Applejack nodded. "That's how I ran into him. I was tryin' to get Fluttershy to…"

"Twilight, put me down!" Discord commanded.

She obeyed him and he flopped to the floor. Springing up, he desperately grabbed Applejack by the shoulders.

"That *vile snake* is a guest in the home of *my beloved angel* ?!"

"Yes!" Applejack shouted. "And I think he intends to make Fluttershy his next victim!"

Discord pushed her away and growled. "Not on *my* watch!"

" *Ooh* !" Rarity huffed. "Just when I think that *ruffian* couldn't sink any lower!"

"Is *every* count in this country a vampire?" Pinkie wondered aloud. "I mean why can't they be marquises or barons or lords…?"

Twilight put her hoof to her head. "Oh, I feel so *stupid* ! All this time, the answer was right under our noses! Flash and I had encountered the Sirens the night we questioned Count Trenderhoof! He must've sensed we were getting too close to the truth and so he sent the Sirens to silence us both!"

"Or viscounts or dukes or princes…"

" *I* feel idiotic as well!" Rarity said. "I'd forgotten that mare who had tried to stop us at the dinner party was staying at Fluttershy's with her brother!"

"Or thatchers or bakers or candlestick makers…"

"Wait." Twilight groaned in frustration. " *That's* why she looked familiar! That mare I've been seeing, she's Lady Sunset Shimmer of Bullarest! I saw her briefly at Count Trenderhoof's! She's his sister! If only I'd seen her in her pony form then…" Her eyes widened

suddenly. "But wait, if Trenderhoof's the master and the master is her mate then…"

She covered her mouth as her cheeks puffed. "Oh sweet darkness! That is *so* disgusting!"

"Hold on!" Spike said. "Are you saying that Count Trenderhoof is together with his," he gagged, " *sister* ?!"

"Yuck!" Rainbow sputtered.

"I don't think it's his sister," Applejack said. "If Trenderhoof was tryin' to court Fluttershy, he wouldn't want her to know about his… *mistresses* ."

"But Twilight," Rarity said, "you said that she said that she had a mate. You mean to tell me some pony was *insane* enough to actually *mate* with that brute?!"

"I shouldn't be too surprised," Twilight coughed as she slowly recovered. "She *was* pretty despicable."

"I don't care who that slime ball is rolling in the hay with!" Discord snorted. "As long as it's not with my Fluttershy!"

"We gotta save her before that Tailhoof or whatever gets her!" Rainbow said, pounding her hooves together.

"Well then what are we waiting for? Let's get going!"

He was about to take off when Applejack stepped on his tail.

"Master, aren't ya forgettin'? The sun?"

"Oh," he said, his shoulders slumping. "Right. But you can't expect me to just sit around and do nothing, do you?!"

"You're gonna have to! For now."

"She's right," Twilight said. "Trenderhoof and his flunkies know we're onto them now. They'll be on high alert. They've seen each of us now."

"Except for Spike and the Master," Pinkie pointed out.

"Yes, but the Master cannot go near the house until after dark. We're going to have to wait until the minute the sun has set."

"What if Trenderhoof strikes before then?" Rarity questioned.

"If I am correct, this is no ordinary game for Trenderhoof. I've heard rumors that he's financially in debt."

"So," Discord snarled angrily, "he's only after her *money* ?!"

Twilight nodded. "Which means in order to legally obtain that money, he will have to marry her. That buys us some time, but not a lot."

"Then I will go at the crack of dusk!" Discord declared, puffing out his chest. "I don't care if Fluttershy wants to be with me or not! I'm not letting her fall prey to some phony count!"

"But *you're* a phony count, Master!" Pinkie exclaimed.

Rainbow covered her mouth. "Way to go, Master!"

As the others cheered, Discord tried to hide his worry, not just about what might happen to his Fluttershy, but at seeing her again after their falling out.

Fluttershy hadn't left her chair since her conversation with Applejack, Angel still in her lap. She was thinking hard on the farm mare's words. She winced at the image of Discord walking into the sunlight and bursting into flames and she sobbed knowing that she had made him do that.

Did this mean she should go to him and beg him for forgiveness? Once again, she could not draw the line between want and need. Did she *want* to be with him? Or was it because he *needed* her?

The door snapped her out of her thoughts and her aunt entered the room.

"How are you feeling, dear?" she asked.

"A little better." Fluttershy sighed. "Maybe worse."

"I see. Well then, I have some news that might lift your spirits."

Something was off about Starlight's voice. It held little emotion, not even the artificial kind. Fluttershy looked up and saw a strange blank look in her aunt's eyes.

"Is something wrong, Auntie?"

"No," Starlight said monotonously. "Nothing's wrong. Everything's right."

Trenderhoof appeared behind her, wearing a smile that sent a chill up Fluttershy's spine.

"Auntie, what's going on?"

"Tell her, doamnă," said Trenderhoof.

"Count Trenderhoof has asked for your hoof in marriage," Starlight said bluntly.

Fluttershy dropped Angel as she stood. "W-W-What?"

"And I have given him my consent."

The pegasus was at a loss for words as Trenderhoof stalked towards her.

"I know this is sudden, domnişoara," he said, taking her hoof. "But I have grown quite fond of our time together and so I've arranged for us to be wed at City Hall tomorrow."

"T-T-Tomorrow?" Fluttershy stammered.

"I understand your aunt wants a big lavish wedding, but you see I have business in Zebrica coming up very soon and this must be taken care of as soon as possible." He whispered in her ear. "If you want, you can come with me to Zebrica for our honeymoon."

Those words broke Fluttershy's trance. Scowling, she wrenched her hoof out of his grasp.

"No!"

Trenderhoof blinked in surprise. "No?"

Fluttershy took a steady breath and held her head high. "Thank you for the offer, Count Trenderhoof, but I'm afraid I must decline."

He snorted and grabbed her by the shoulders. " *No pony* says no to *me* !"

Angel hopped between them and he snarled at the count, making him jump back in alarm. He growled at the rabbit and the mare, but then calmed himself down.

"Unfortunately, my dear, that is not *your* decision to make." He turned back to Starlight, who seemed to be unfazed by the spectacle. "Isn't that right, Lady Starlight?"

"Indeed," Starlight droned. "You must wed Count Trenderhoof immediately."

"Auntie!" Fluttershy exclaimed, pushing past the count. "You *can't* ! You *can't* make me marry him! I don't love him!"

Her aunt's eyes looked straight ahead, not focusing on her. "You might grow to love him."

"No, Auntie!" Fluttershy said, stomping her hoof. "I can't marry Count Trenderhoof because I LOVE COUNT DISCORD!"

Trenderhoof's cocky smile vanished and Angel squeaked in shock. Starlight remained stoic. Fluttershy felt like a weight had been taken off her chest. In one split second, her decision was made.

She now understood what Applejack had been trying to tell her. Creatures who were willing to lay down their lives for the ones they loved were extremely rare. Why should Fluttershy be so foolish as to throw someone like that away? All that time they'd been together, Discord had treated her with respect and courtesy and had valued

her opinions. He was nothing like the crude stallions who would manipulate mares to get what they wanted like the scoundrel who had ravished Rarity and Applejack, and Discord wasn't inconsiderate like Trenderhoof was being right now.

Fluttershy knew what she wanted now. She wanted to be with Discord not because he needed her, but because *she* needed *him* . Without him, she was miserable and indecisive. But now, even though he wasn't with her, the thought of him gave her the strength and courage that was required for this moment.

Narrowing her eyes and squaring her shoulders, Fluttershy faced her aunt and said, " *Discord* is the one I want to marry, Auntie. And there is no reason you shouldn't support this match. I love him and he loves me. On top of that, he is far wealthier than Trenderhoof, owns a much larger estate, is of high social status, *and* is more of a gentlecolt than *he* is!"

Trenderhoof scowled at her. "So that crafty count has seduced you, eh? No matter. Not all my mares were virgins."

She turned to him in confusion. "What?"

"See here, domnişoară," he said lowly, advancing towards her. "It doesn't matter whether you love me or not!"

Fluttershy squeaked as she was backed into the door.

"Your aunt says we will be wed tomorrow morning at ten, and *you're* going to be there! Even if I have to lock you in here for the rest of the day!"

She gulped. "B-But…you have no right to…"

"Maybe not." He grinned at Starlight. "But *she* does."

Fluttershy gasped as her aunt levitated a key out of her dress. "Auntie, please!"

"Take time to think about it," Starlight murmured as she walked out with Trenderhoof.

The door was shut before Fluttershy could stop them. She could hear the key turning in the lock.

"What if she flies out window?" Trenderhoof asked on the other side.

"She hasn't flown since she was a filly," said Starlight's emotionless voice.

"Show a little more enthusiasm, will you? You sound so dry."

Fluttershy jiggled the doorknob and banged on the door. "Let me out of here! Please! You can't keep me in here!"

Angel also knocked hard on the door, but his tiny paws barely made a difference. Eventually, Fluttershy admitted defeat and slunk to the floor, crying in exhaustion. Her rabbit's ears drooped as he curled up to her.

"Oh, Angel," she choked. "If I hadn't driven Discord away like that, none of this would've happened! I know I said our relationship would be too complicated, but no matter what the future holds for us, we'd be together!" She sighed. "And now I'm being forced into a loveless marriage against my will."

As she went on, Angel was making his own decision. He didn't like Discord, but he would at least treat his owner better than Trenderhoof. He hopped to the window seat and pointed outside.

"What is it, Angel?" Fluttershy asked, rising to follow him.

The bunny flapped his arms speedily.

"Oh, Angel, you know I can't fly."

He shook his head and then drooped one of his ears halfway as he bared his teeth.

"Oh, you mean Discord?"

Angel nodded and tapped his nose.

"You're right," she said hopefully. "He *could* fly me out of here!"

Then she frowned. "Oh, but how will I be able to reach him? I doubt Auntie Starlight will let me send a letter to him, and I don't think she'll give the servants the chance."

But then her answer came as she looked out and spotted an orange speck in the streets. Fluttershy threw open the window, put her hoof in her mouth and whistled long and hard. Scootaloo looked up and saw her waving her hooves wildly. The filly trotted up so she was directly under the window.

"What's up, Fluttershy?" she called. "You know, other than you?"

"Scootaloo, I need your help!"

The filly saluted. "Name it, domnişoară! I am at your service!"

"I'm getting married tomorrow!"

"Oh, congratulations!"

The mare shook her head. "No, no, no! You don't understand! It's to Count Trenderhoof!"

Scootaloo gasped in horror. "You don't mean that guy you were with yesterday?"

"Yes, that's him!"

"Fluttershy, you can't marry him! He's bad news!"

"That's my problem! I don't *want* to marry him! I want to marry *Count Discord* !"

The filly's jaw dropped. "That hermit up in that spooky castle in the forest?"

"Yes! I need you to get a message to him!"

Scootaloo cringed at her request. While she would never admit this out loud, that forest scared her to death. There were so many wild beasts about, not to mention vampires. However, she couldn't let this mare who had been so kind to her marry some pony she didn't

love, especially considering he was a murderous vampire.

"You can count on me!" she declared, puffing up her chest. "Just tell me the message!"

Fluttershy looked around the square. She hadn't considered that some pony might be listening. Then again, the streets were so busy it was likely she was but a small tweet in the cacophonous crowd. Still, she had to be cautious.

"Wait right here!"

She went back inside to her writing desk, where she hastily began scribbling a note:

My dearest Discord,

I am so sorry for what I said last night. Now I know for sure what I want and that is you. But I'm afraid that might be impossible as my aunt is forcing me to marry Count Trenderhoof tomorrow morning! Please come to my window tonight as soon as you can! I'll be waiting for you to take me away.

Forever Yours,

Fluttershy

After a thought, she wrote:

P. S. Make sure the filly who brings this note gets something to eat.

She placed the note in an envelope and licked it closed. Returning to the window, she shouted, "Watch out!"

She dropped the letter and it slowly glided down into Scootaloo's ready hooves.

"Do you know where Discord's castle is?" Fluttershy asked.

"Uh-huh," the filly replied with a nod.

"Take this to the castle and don't stop for anything! Make sure

whoever answers the door knows that I sent you, and tell them it's urgent!"

"Aye-aye, captain!"

And with a final salute, she was off. Fluttershy slumped into the window seat and let out a satisfied sigh.

"Do you think he'll come for me?" she asked Angel. "What am I saying? Of course he will!" She frowned slightly. "If he still loves me, that is."

Luckily for Scootaloo, most of the wild predators in the forest slept during the day. Just in case, however, she would look over her shoulder ever two minutes to be certain no one was following her. For all she knew, Count Trenderhoof could've sent those horrible singing mares after her.

After several painful hours of uphill climbing, Scootaloo finally reached the castle. She had seen it once before at night, but in the daylight it didn't look that intimidating. She'd never seen the Count Discord, but if Fluttershy trusted him enough with her life, Scootaloo felt she could trust him too.

She could not reach the doorknocker, so she pounded as hard as she could on the large door. A few minutes later it was answered by some pony she recognized.

"Rainbow Dash?"

The mare gaped down at her. "Scootaloo? What are you doing here?"

"I came here to… Hey! The dark spooky castle you were talking about at the tavern was *Count Discord's* castle?" She gasped. "Does that mean Count Discord's a vampire too?!"

Rainbow blinked and shook her head. "Again. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, right!" Scootaloo showed her the envelope. "I have a message from Lady Fluttershy!"

"Fluttershy?!" Rainbow glanced around anxiously. "Did any pony follow you up here?"

"Nope. I made sure of it."

She ushered the filly inside and shut the door, bolting the lock.

"You're friends with Fluttershy?" Rainbow asked as she led her down the hall.

"Mmm-hmm," Scootaloo said with a nod. "Yesterday she helped me get these new clothes!"

"I *thought* something was different about you."

"So this is where vampires live?" She gazed up at the grand architecture. "Do you really sleep in coffins? Does garlic really bother you guys? How come you didn't burn up in the sun when I opened the door? Is it true that if some pony leaves seeds by their window, you have to like count them or whatever? Is it true that…?"

Rainbow's hoof silenced her. "Why don't we save the questions for *after* you give your message?"

They found the others in the gymnasium. Discord felt it was best that they all prepare themselves should they have to battle Trenderhoof and his coven. Applejack and Rarity were especially taking their anger out on straw dummies shaped like Trenderhoof. Scootaloo gawked at the spectacle, for all the mares were in their bat forms and Discord was on the far end of the room, setting fire to a ring of dummies.

"Oh my *Celestia* !"

Every pony turned in alarm. Discord was about to cast his hypnotic spell when the filly ran up to him excitedly.

"Are you a draconequus?! I thought you guys were just a legend, but here you are! Wow, you're a lot freakier than I thought you'd be! Not

that you look freaky, but I didn't think you'd have this many animal parts! Though I was told you'd have the fangs of a tiger."

Discord blinked. "Rainbow?!"

"It's okay!" Rainbow said, holding out her hooves. "Scootaloo's a friend!"

"Hey, aren't ya the lil' filly from the tavern?" Applejack asked as she and the others slowly turned to their pony forms.

"Ooh, you clean up nicely!" Pinkie chimed, admiring Scootaloo's new dress.

"Though why are you wearing your gown inside out?" Rarity inquired.

"To keep the nice side from getting dirty," she explained, turning to the draconequus. "Since you're the only guy here, I'm guessing you're Count Discord. Does Fluttershy know you're a vampire?"

"Fluttershy?" Discord said, snatching up the filly. "You know Fluttershy?"

Scootaloo nodded and held out the letter. "She asked me to give this to you. She's in trouble!"

He took the note and carelessly dropped her. Rainbow managed to catch her in time. Ripping open the envelope, Discord skimmed through the note. First he cried out in happiness.

"What's it say, what's it say?" Pinkie asked, bouncing up and down eagerly.

He placed the paper to his chest. "She says she wants to be with me!"

She sprang into the air. "Yay!"

Then he finished the letter and gasped in horror. "But she's marrying Count Trenderhoof in the morning?!"

Pinkie scowled. "Boo!"

"That fiend!" Applejack growled.

Rarity pounded her hooves together. "I'll strangle him!"

"But she wants to marry *you* , mister!" Scootaloo exclaimed. "She told me so herself!" She stepped back as a thought occurred to her. "But you're not gonna…you know, *eat* her, right? Because it's bad enough that she's being forced to marry this other vampire."

"Hold on there!" Applejack said. "How'd ya know Trenderhoof's a vampire?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. When I first saw him, I got this… strange, tingling feeling. In fact I'm getting it right now around you."

Twilight stepped forward in interest. "Are you saying that you can *sense* vampires?"

"I guess, but I don't know why."

"I think I know," Rainbow said, rubbing her chin. "Hey squirt, are you by any chance a twin?"

Scootaloo's eyes widened in surprise. "Actually…I am. Or I was. My mom said I had a twin sister that didn't make it."

"Well then that settles it!"

"It does?" Twilight questioned, scrunching her muzzle.

"There's this old Romane myth that twins who wear their clothes inside out can sense vampires."

"Ohhhhhh," Scootaloo said with a nod. "That explains a lot."

"So Fluttershy is marrying Trenderhoof in the morning?" Rarity asked Discord in panic.

"Against her will!" Discord exclaimed, showing them the letter.

"Then there's no time to lose," said Applejack. "Master, ya gotta get

her out o' there *tonight* !"

"Why not now?" Scootaloo asked.

"The Master can't go out in the sunlight," Twilight explained. "Even if he could, if we go after her now, some pony's sure to notice."

"Then it's settled!" Discord said firmly. "I'm going to her tonight and that's final!" He looked back at the note in thought. "Hmm. Apparently this also says to give the filly carrying this letter something to eat."

"It does?" Scootaloo questioned, squinting at the paper.

"Yes, didn't you know?"

"Uh," she said, biting her lip. "I *would've* taken a peek, but…I can't really read."

He cocked his eyebrow. "Really?

She shook her head. "I never learned."

He stroked his beard in thought. "Applejack, can you prepare something for our guest?"

"Sure," Applejack said, turning to the filly. "What would ya like?"

"Ah, I'll eat anything," Scootaloo said before suddenly cringing. "But uh…not what you guys eat, okay?"

Applejack chuckled. "Don't worry. You're not the only mortal in here."

As the orange mare left, Scootaloo looked curiously up at Discord. "So do you really have unlimited magic powers?"

Flattered, Discord grinned bashfully. "Well, I don't know about *unlimited* …"

"But can you do any cool tricks?"

He tapped his chin. "Well…"

To Scootaloo's awe, he reached down and pulled a stuffed bear out of her ear.

"Gee, thanks, mister!" she said, hugging the bear. "I always wanted a toy!"

Discord smiled warmly at the foal.

"Where are your parents, kid?" Rainbow asked in concern.

Scootaloo shook her head. "Don't have any."

Discord frowned. "So…you don't have a place to stay?"

She shrugged. "I'm pretty sure that Trenderhoof guy's onto me. I was there the night his singing girls took out those Romane stallions."

"The Sirens," Twilight grunted furiously.

"Oh, Discord," Rarity said. "We can't have this sweet little filly going back out in the cold where those awful other vampires are probably waiting for her!"

Discord nodded. "You are absolutely right." He knelt down to the filly. "You are welcome to stay here as long as you like, but only if you promise not to tell any pony about us."

Scootaloo pretended to zip her mouth closed. "You won't hear a word out of me, mister! Golly, you're nice! I'm starting to see why Fluttershy likes you so much."

The filly's compliment touched his heart.

"So," Pinkie said, playfully nudging her master. "If Fluttershy wants to be with you, and she's coming over soon, does that mean there are going to be wedding bells a' chiming?"

He bit his lip. "Uh, Pinkie…just because she's changed her mind about me doesn't mean we're…you know, going to be making plans any time soon."

She rolled her eyes as she walked toward the door. "If you say so…"

"Where are you going?" Twilight inquired.

"Oh," Pinkie said, smiling innocently, "just going out for some… supplies."

That thing about twins sensing vampires is an actual myth. I thought it'd be cool to include!

The whole "want" and "need" debate was based on a conversation my coworkers were having, that one should be with a guy who "wants" you rather than "needs" you. I concluded that it's a little bit of both.

Plans

I HAVE GLASSES! I CAN SEE! Sorry, I'm just excited to be able to type on the computer without my head splitting open! That's part of the reason this was delayed. The other is that I've been binge watching "Steven Universe." Blame the ones who recommended that awesome show to me.

The wedding dress was ivory white, the skirt puffed up like a pastry. The crinoline and corset were so tight, Fluttershy wished Discord were there to poof them away. The sleeves covered every inch of her forelegs and the bodice was buttoned up to her neck. Coco Pommel was putting on the veil which fell on her head like gossamer.

It all looked lovely in the mirror, but Fluttershy could only stare ominously.

Her aunt was back to her usual spirits, barking orders at Coco and Night Glider, yet there was still something aloof in her voice.

"Night Glider, there's a tear in that skirt."

The maid rolled her eyes as she got her needle and thread.

Starlight appeared in the mirror. "You look lovely, dear. Count Trenderhoof will be left speechless."

"I'm not marrying him, Auntie," Fluttershy muttered tiredly.

"None of that nonsense," her aunt said as she levitated a clipboard in front of her. "Alright, we will head to City Hall at nine-thirty and then begin the ceremony at ten. Afterwards, we will have a short reception here. The Count insisted we keep the guest list to a minimum. At noon the two of you will be taken to the dock where a boat will take you to…"

Fluttershy spoke again, louder and firmer. "I'm *not* marrying him, Auntie! I don't love him!"

Starlight shook her head. "Things don't always turn out the way we plan, darling. You should get those silly thoughts of love out of your head, just as I had."

She turned to her aunt in surprise. "Just as *you* had?"

The unicorn paused and lowered her clipboard. "Coco, Night Glider, leave us for a moment."

The maids stopped what they were doing and left the room. Starlight's expression was unreadable.

"Long before you were born, dear, I knew this colt named Sunburst. He was the son of the local librarian. As a foal I…used to spend my days in the library studying, and that's how I came to know Sunburst. He was always so helpful."

A small smile tugged at her lips. "Every now and then we would sneak out to play together. As we grew older, our friendship turned into…something more."

She frowned. "We had planned to run away together to get married, but then…your mother did the same with your father. She was disowned by the family and I was made the chief heiress."

Wincing, she stammered, "I-It was never about the money or the estate. I…just couldn't stand to disappoint my family the way my sister had. I didn't want to lose their approval."

She inhaled deeply and straightened up. "So, I broke my engagement with Sunburst and married your uncle as my parents wished."

Fluttershy stared at her aunt, as if she were seeing a different pony. "W-What happened to Sunburst?"

The unicorn shook her head. "He went abroad and I never saw him again."

"But…you *loved* him."

"Yes, well, we don't live in a world where every pony is equal and can make their own choices regardless of their social class. We have to accept that."

"Then why can't I marry Count Discord? *He's* of the same class as Trenderhoof. What difference would it make if I married him instead?"

Starlight blinked and her eyes reverted to their emotionless gaze. "That's just the way it has to be."

"But Auntie…"

"He can make you happy. In time, you might grow to like each other. If not, you at least won't be alone and someday, you'll have children to occupy your time."

Fluttershy shook her head. "What would be the point of having children with him if I don't even love him enough to…?"

She blushed before she could finish her sentence.

"I am sorry, darling," Starlight said bluntly. "But you must marry Count Trenderhoof."

"But…"

"Get some rest for tomorrow."

Starlight went out and shut the door, locking it again. Fluttershy stood aghast, not understanding what was happening. What was *wrong* with her aunt? A few days ago she had been fawning over Count Discord's eligibility and now she was suddenly having her marry Count Trenderhoof? While Fluttershy felt sorry for Starlight having to give up her love, this arrangement still didn't make sense.

Fluttershy knew for sure now that Discord was the right choice. Her aunt had been through a loveless marriage because it had been expected of her, regardless of her own feelings. Well, Fluttershy was not her aunt. She was her own pony and she wasn't going to let

others make her decisions for her.

Glaring at her reflection, she tore off her veil and began tugging angrily at her skirt. She lifted it up and banged on the crinoline, leaving small dents in it. Then she reached under and ripped the strings of her corset. Angel watched in awe as she absentmindedly peeled and tore at her ensemble.

"Now what did that gown ever do to you?"

Fluttershy gasped and turned to the window. The face she saw made her heart leap with joy.

"Discord!"

She raced up to him, flung her hooves around his neck and pressed her lips firmly against his. Discord had to grip the window ledge to keep himself from falling. When she pulled away, his eyes were still wide in shock.

"Oh, Discord!" she exclaimed as tears began welling up in her eyes. "I am so sorry for what I said to you last night! I was wrong! I don't need children to be happy! All I need is you! *You're* the one I love! *You're* the one I want to marry! I don't care if I have to spend the rest of my life as a vampire as long as I am with you I'll have everything I'll ever…"

Discord cut her off with another kiss, this one softer but even more passionate. Joyful bloody tears were trickling down his cheeks. As he drew away, he smiled gratefully at her.

"Just 'I love you' would've sufficed, but thank you for the clarification."

Fluttershy giggled happily as she embraced him. "Oh, Discord, I was so worried I had chased you away!"

"Oh my darling," he cooed, caressing her face. "You could *never* keep me away." His expression became serious. "But we can talk about this later. Right now, we need to get you out of here. Trenderhoof's a vampire!"

Fluttershy sighed. "Discord, I don't like him much either, but there's no need to call him names."

"No, no, no! Applejack saw him earlier today! He, the Dazzlings, his sister, they're all vampires! And what's worse, Trenderhoof's the same vampire who sired Rarity and Applejack!"

Her eyes widened. "A-Are you sure?"

He nodded. "He even threatened Applejack and she told us about it immediately!"

Everything started to make sense now. "So *that's* why he was in such a rush to marry me! And why they didn't eat much, and…" She gasped. "Discord, I think he's hypnotized my aunt!"

"She'll be okay. It's not her he's after. But we have to get you out of here *now* !"

"Okay," she heaved, setting her hooves on the floor. "Just let me grab a few things."

She picked up the sun pendant and her butterfly one, putting the latter on and tucking the former in her bodice. Then she grabbed a small portrait of her mother and lastly, the pot containing the Infinite Iris.

"Alright, let's go!" she said, returning to the window.

Discord cocked his head. "Is that all?"

She shrugged. "There's not much I need here."

She heard a squeak and looked down to see Angel tugging at her skirt.

"Oh, Angel! I almost forgot! Discord, I can't leave him here!"

"Well, uh…" He cringed. "Oh, fine! You carry him and I'll carry you."

Angel hopped into Fluttershy's hooves. Then she stood on the window seat and hooked her foreleg around Discord's neck as he

scooped her into his arms bridal style. As they flew off, Fluttershy kept her gaze on the mansion where she had spent most of her life until the light in her bedroom window was nothing but a golden speck in the darkness.

"Discord," she said, closing her eyes so she wouldn't have to look down. "How much do you know about Trenderhoof and the others?"

"Not much, but apparently the Dazzlings are the Sirens Twilight's been after."

"Really?"

"Applejack, Rainbow and Pinkie saw them in the tavern one night, singing for their supper so to speak."

"So is Sunset Shimmer a vampire too?"

He nodded. "The one Twilight met the other night that alerted us that there was a visiting coven in the first place. Though if Twilight's correct, she might not be Trenderhoof's sister but his, um…"

"What?"

Not wanting to hurt her innocence, he quickly said, "Oh, never mind."

"What about Bulk?"

He raised an eyebrow. "Bulk?"

"Bulk Biceps, their bodyguard. He was with Sunset Shimmer at Fancy Pants' dinner party. Is he a vampire too?"

He paused. "That's strange. The girls were pretty sure there were only five members in the coven. Then again, the Sirens could've been lying."

"Discord, are we almost there?" Fluttershy asked, tightening her eyelids.

"Almost. Though you know once you have your bat wings, you'll

have to learn to fly on your own." He bit his lip. "That is, if you actually want to, uh…"

"Why don't we talk about this when we're on the ground?" she shouted over the wind.

At last they came to the castle. Discord gently glided to the front door. Once she could no longer feel the wind stinging her face, Fluttershy hesitantly opened her eyes. The door opened immediately to reveal all the mares, Spike and Scootaloo huddled in the entrance.

"Oh, thank Darkness!" Rarity heaved in relief.

"Trenderhoof didn't follow ya, did he?" Applejack inquired.

"Whoa, whoa!" Spike exclaimed, pushing the mares aside. "Give them some room!"

Every pony backed up, allowing their master in. He shut the door and set his beloved down.

"Yay, Fluttershy's back!" Pinkie piped, giving her a hard squeeze. "Ooh, and you brought your cute little bunny friend!"

Angel flinched at the pink mare's wide smile and hid his face in his owner's foreleg.

"Darling!" Rarity gasped as she examined Fluttershy's torn rags. "What in the *world* are you wearing?!"

"Oh," Fluttershy said with a blush. "This *was* my wedding dress…"

"Your aunt was going to let you get married in *that* ?!"

"No, you see…"

"I knew she had horrible fashion sense, but *this* is ridiculous!" She patted Fluttershy on the back. "Fortunately, dearest, I always have a spare gown on hoof."

"Aw, I've had worse," said Scootaloo.

"Oh, Scootaloo," Fluttershy said, kneeling down. "I didn't think you'd still be here."

"Yeah, well, I knew that Trenderhoof guy was bad news and thought he'd send his singing Sirens after me. By the way, Flutters, what's with you and attracting so many vampires?"

She chuckled nervously. "I hope you understand that these vampires aren't like Trenderhoof."

"Aw, I already figured that out. Discord here's been showing me some cool magic tricks! Wish *I* was able to make gold out of nothing!"

"As cozy as this warm fuzzy stuff is," Rainbow said, "aren't we forgetting there's this whole other coven out there after Fluttershy?"

"Rainbow's right," Twilight said with a nod. "They're sure to notice Fluttershy's gone. Once they do, it won't take long for them to figure out she's with us. A war's inevitable now. We have to be ready."

Fluttershy looked up at Discord fearfully. "Can they really come after me?"

He was just as concerned, but tried to put on a brave face. "They can try, but we won't let them."

"But Discord, you don't know what they're capable of. Applejack and Rarity only knew Trenderhoof a short time. They don't know how strong or smart he is in battle."

"She has a point," Twilight agreed. "Even with all our powers combined, we don't know if that'll be enough. The Sirens' singing won't work on us because we're vampires, but they are crafty and strong when fighting together. And Sunset Shimmer has exhibited great intelligence and magical talent."

"And we don't even know if Bulk Biceps is one of them or just a hypnotized slave, but he looks strong. What if…?" Fluttershy paused. "W-What if you can't fight them off?"

Every pony looked worried.

"If we fail," Twilight said carefully, "chances are he will…try to force you to be his bride. Maybe hypnotize you."

"Why hasn't he already?" Fluttershy wondered.

Twilight tapped her chin in thought. "Good question. That would've been much easier."

"And…if he turns me into…a vampire?"

"No!" Discord cried, kneeling down to her. "I won't let that happen!"

"Then what if," she looked up at him decidedly, "I'm *already* a vampire?"

He blinked. "W-What?"

"Think about it, Discord." She set Angel down and took Discord's paw. "If I'm a vampire, he can't hypnotize me. He also won't be able to change me or…make me his mistress if I am already bound to you!"

He gulped. "B-B-But…"

"Discord, the best way to protect me is for us to marry. Tonight."

His eyes widened. "T-Tonight?!"

She nodded. "Yes, Discord! Tonight!"

"But…are you sure… *now* ?!"

Grinning, she kissed his paw. "I am sure."

"Yippee!" Pinkie cheered, jumping into the air. "Time to get started on the wedding cake!"

"Wedding cake?" every pony said.

"Mmm-hmm! You didn't think I was gonna pass up an opportunity like this, did you? What did you think I was doing in town today?"

Applejack put her hoof to her head. "Pinkie, we don't have time to…"

"Hold on, Applejack!" Rarity interjected. "Just because we're making this speedy doesn't mean we can't still abide by tradition." She took Fluttershy's hoof. "Come on, dear. I can fix that gown up in a jiffy and in the meantime get you into something more…suitable."

"But Trenderhoof…"

"Won't even start looking for her until morning!"

Applejack groaned. "Twilight, back me up here!"

The lavender unicorn glanced between Rarity and Pinkie. "I suppose we can spare a few hours to prepare a small ceremony."

"Wait, wait, wait!" Rainbow said, holding up her hooves. "How traditional are making this? Mating ceremonies don't really take that long."

"What do you think, Master?"

Discord was still aghast at how fast this was all happening. He couldn't believe Fluttershy wanted this *now* . He was a nervous wreck, but seeing the hopeful look in her eyes, he began relaxing.

"Well, um…" He cleared his throat. "Perhaps some pony should… officiate." He smiled down at the lavender unicorn. "What do you say, Twilight?"

She put her hoof to her chest. "You…want *me* to preside over the ceremony?"

He nodded. "I cannot think of any pony more thorough and professional."

She looked as if she couldn't contain her excitement. "Oh, Master, I'm so…so *honored* ! I won't let you down!"

"How about rings?" He turned to Fluttershy. "Would you like a ring, Fluttershy?"

She blushed. "Oh, I…I suppose a ring would be…nice."

"Then it's settled. I'll make some rings and Spike can carry them."

"Sweet!" Spike exclaimed. "I'll go find my suit! Oh, and a pillow!"

The dragon scampered down the hall.

"And I'll whip up the oven and, ooh!" Pinkie squealed. "We should have the ceremony in the ballroom!" She whipped her hooves out. "No pony go in there until I say so!"

As she whizzed off, Twilight turned to the others. "Looks like we're having a wedding after all. Rarity, how soon can you have the gown ready?"

"Well, seeing how the fabric is already fitted," Rarity said, scrutinizing the ripped ensemble, "I'd say about three hours."

"Then we'll meet in the ballroom in four hours. That should give us plenty of time to prepare and we'll be finished before sunrise. Applejack, Rainbow, you go see if Pinkie needs help with the cake."

"On it!" Rainbow saluted as she and Applejack headed for the kitchen.

"Come, dear," Rarity said as she led Fluttershy down the hall, Angel bouncing along after them.

Fluttershy flashed Discord a smile before disappearing.

"Right," Twilight said. "I better start figuring out what I'm going to say."

She left Discord with Scootaloo, who was yawning.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, rubbing her eyes. "Think I can take a nap before this wedding thing?"

"Certainly. We have plenty of spare bedrooms. Follow me."

He took her to a small room with twin beds. Laughing excitedly,

Scootaloo galloped to one of them and began bounding on the mattress.

"Easy there!" Discord said, catching the filly in his paw and claw. "You might hit your head!"

"Sorry," she said with a blush. "I've just never had a bed before."

He blinked. " *Never* ?"

"Well, Mom and I did share a hammock at one point, but never a whole mattress with pillows and blankets and feathers and…"

She trailed off as she let out another yawn. Discord chuckled at her adorable behavior.

"You forget what a bed is for," he said as he set her down. "Sleeping."

She moaned in annoyance as he pulled the covers over her. "But now I'm too excited to sleep!"

"Okay, well…what can I do to help you sleep?"

She yawned again. "Mom used to sing this lullaby. It was corny but it helped."

He bit his lip. "Well, how's it go?"

She took a deep breath and began singing a sleepy tune:

" *Little filly in a tree,*

Little filly, you're so sweet.

Little filly, don't be scared.

Little filly, lots of…hair… "

Her eyelids were drooping. "Doesn't make much sense, I know."

"Okay," Discord said nervously. "I'm not much for singing, but…"

He snapped his fingers as an idea occurred to him. A piano appeared and he sat on the bench. After cracking his knuckles, he began to play Scootaloo's lullaby. With one final yawn, the filly descended into the realm of sleep. Discord gazed at the foal's peaceful face. Smiling, he gently removed her kerchief, releasing her short choppy mane, and set it on the side table.

"Thanks," Scootaloo muttered, still half conscious.

It was strange. Discord didn't think he'd be good with foals, and yet he had spent half the day entertaining this filly, making sure she was well fed and had now just helped her to sleep. What's more, she wasn't scared of him.

And she had no place to go.

Once he had shut the door, Discord started down the hall, but then stopped when he noticed one of the guest bedroom doors was open. He peeked in and saw Fluttershy, now dressed in a violet gown she had obviously borrowed from Rarity, curled up on the bed, her back to him. He knocked softly on the door. Fluttershy turned her head slightly.

"Hi," he said.

She rolled her head away with a sigh. "Come in and close the door."

He did so and cautiously approached the bed. Now he could see that she was clutching Angel to her chest.

"What are you doing in here?" he inquired. "I thought you'd be with Rarity."

"She said I could take this moment to rest," Fluttershy murmured. "I should be sleeping, but I don't feel like sleeping. It only just occurred to me. This is my last night as a mortal."

Twiddling his fingers, Discord sat on the edge of the bed. "Before we go through with this, I think…there are a few things we need to talk about."

Fluttershy sat up and turned to him. "Like what?"

He sighed. "Ever since I first met you, I've dreamed of the day that we would be together forever. Now that it's happening, I…I can't help thinking of…what I'll be taking away from you."

"Oh, Discord," she said, setting Angel down as she crawled to his side. "I told you. I *want* this."

He looked down at her uncertainly. "You sure you're not just doing this to escape Trenderhoof? After all, you didn't know he was a vampire before."

"No, no." She laid her hoof over his claw. "I'm doing this because I love you. Though, I will admit, I didn't quite realize how much I loved you until I was told that I would be marrying Trenderhoof. He said he'd take me to Zebrica for our honeymoon. Zebrica, Discord. The place we talked about going to together. I just couldn't see myself going there without you. I couldn't see myself going *anywhere* without you."

She smiled sweetly. "You're a part of me now, Discord. I'm braver, stronger, happier when I am with you."

"But I can't give you children."

"Children would be nice, but what would be the point in having a baby if it isn't yours?" She lowered her head. "And I know how you would feel about it, and it's alright. At least with you I won't be alone."

Stroking his beard, Discord grinned at a thought. "You know, that little filly friend of yours isn't so bad."

"I didn't mean to trouble you with her. I didn't think she'd be staying."

"Oh no, don't apologize. She's been delightful company today, and she seems quite comfortable here." He frowned slightly. "Of course, once this business is taken care of she'll have no home to return to." He glanced slyly at her. "But perhaps, if she wants to stay here on a more *permanent* basis…"

"Wait." Fluttershy's eyes widened. "Are you saying that…?"

He winked. "She doesn't have parents, we can't reproduce…"

She gasped. "Oh, Discord! That's a wonderful idea!" She threw her hooves around his middle. "Oh, Scootaloo will be so happy when I tell her!"

Discord chuckled as he returned her hug. "I may not know much about foals, but I think I'll get along fine with her."

Drawing away, Fluttershy said, "Should we go tell her now?"

"Best wait until later. Right now she's sleeping." He whispered in her ear. "I put her to bed myself."

She giggled. "I think you'll make a great father."

"Oh! We should plan our honeymoon! Alright, so Sombra and Hope said we could borrow their cave for…" He suddenly slapped himself. "Darn it! I said I'd invite them to the wedding!" He sighed. "Too late now. But, if Trenderhoof and his crew become a hassle, we could use some help."

He took a tiny silver whistle out of his shirt and blew into it. No sound was made.

"What is that?" Fluttershy questioned.

"I made this whistle during my visit with Sombra," Discord explained as he tucked the whistle away. "It's enchanted so that only he and Hope can hear the sound. Should I need anything, I just blow this whistle. They won't be here in time for the wedding, but they might be able to provide some backup."

"I look forward to meeting them."

"Oh, you'll like Hope. She's a lot like you. Kind, caring, but of course, I prefer you."

She sighed dreamily as she dropped onto her back. "Oh, I can't wait to see all the plants and animals and the beautiful sun…"

Discord chuckled awkwardly. "Yeah. The sun."

Remembering his condition, Fluttershy sat back up. "Oh, Discord, I didn't mean to make you…"

"No, it's fine. But you know? I've dreamt of us many times, lying in the sun together." He sighed. "It would be nice to know the sun's warmth, to know its light, to know why some ponies feel compelled to worship it."

She leaned her head into his side. "I wish I could show you."

"Aw, that's alright," he said with a smile. "You're all the sunshine and warmth I need." He frowned slightly as he patted her. "Even if you won't be as warm after tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"Surely you've noticed that even with all this fur, I'm not as warm as I should be." He demonstrated by brushing his cold claw along her cheek. "I will also miss the rosiness in your cheeks." His claw trailed down to her chest. "And the feel of your heartbeat."

Cringing, he said, "Maybe we shouldn't do this tonight."

"We *have* to do this tonight, Discord," Fluttershy insisted, laying her hooves over his claw. "If Trenderhoof succeeds, this might be our only chance."

He sighed. "You're right." Wrapping his arms around her, he cooed, "No matter what, you'll still be my beautiful angel."

She moaned in satisfaction. "How will we get to Zebrica?"

"Well, we'd fly by night and by day we'll rest in the carriage."

"Can we go by boat?"

He pulled away to look at her curiously. "Boat?"

She nodded. "I've never been on a ship before, nor have I ever seen the ocean."

He bit his lip. "Well, out at sea, there aren't many places for me to

hide from the sunlight."

"Not if you stay below deck during the day. And you can come up at night and we can watch the moonlight on the waves."

He grinned at the thought. "I do like the sound of that. And we could have seafood every night. Oh, if you don't mind having…"

"I don't. As long as…you're the one to…"

"I get it." He glanced around the room. "You know? Once you start living here, we can do some remodeling. Didn't you say you always wanted a garden?"

She gasped. "You…you mean it?!"

"Of course! Or, even better! I can build you a greenhouse! That way the forest animals won't come and eat your plants! And Angel can have a place to run without having to worry about being eaten!"

Fluttershy frowned and looked back at Angel who was snoozing in a ball.

"I'm not so sure I should have him here."

He glanced at the rabbit. "You shouldn't have to worry about him. We don't eat a lot of rodents."

"But you'll be bringing freshly killed animals home every other night. That might terrify him. And," she paused, "what if…what if some pony gets really thirsty and…"

"Hey. We were able to have Spike in the house for this long. Besides, if it becomes too much trouble, he or Scootaloo could look after your bunny."

She shook her head. "I just don't know if he'll be happy here. Maybe…maybe I should release him into the woods."

"He wouldn't last two minutes out there. He's too domesticated." He gave her an assuring squeeze. "Relax. He'll be safe here."

Fluttershy smiled and eased into his embrace. "I can't believe I tried to cut you out of my life. You're the only one who listens to me, who cheers me up when I'm down."

Lowering his head onto hers, he whispered, "Then it's a good thing I'm not going anywhere again, eh?"

She gazed up at him. "We're really doing this, aren't we?"

He gulped. "I guess we are." Then he grinned. "We should make it official."

Snapping his fingers, a red velvet box appeared. Fluttershy put her hoof to her mouth as he opened it to reveal a gorgeous gold bracelet embedded with a pink diamond in the shape of a butterfly.

"I know you already agreed to this," he said slowly, "but I want to ask you properly. Fluttershy," he took her hoof in his claw, "my love, my life, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, from here on to eternity?"

Tears were spilling from her eyes from so much emotion. With a happy sniff, she nodded.

"Yes, Discord," she said as she removed the bracelet from the box. "I will be your wife." She slid it onto her hoof. "From here on to eternity."

That lullaby was actually a song I made up years ago for my cat, only it was "kitty" instead of "filly."

From Here On To Eternity

Always my favorite part of the fanfic.

It is strange to watch yourself be dressed by invisible hooves. At least that's what it looked like to Fluttershy as she gazed into the three mirrors before her. She watched the needle thread itself and stitch her sleeve while her skirt smoothed out automatically. She had to turn around to check that Rarity and Twilight were really there.

"Am I ever going to see myself again?"

"Oh, don't worry dear," Rarity said as she cut the thread. "Twilight accidentally enchanted a mirror that allows us to see ourselves. Master's using it right now. We figured he'd need it more."

"Oh yeah," Fluttershy said, looking back in the middle mirror. "I'd forgotten he'd mentioned that."

"Just remember if you ever forget what you look like, just look in that mirror. Oh, you wouldn't believe how much torture it is not being able to see yourself for a hundred years!"

"Okay," Twilight said, walking in front so Fluttershy could see her. "So here's how we're going to do this. Once Pinkie starts playing the wedding march, first Scootaloo's going to come out and toss some flower petals, then Spike will come with the rings and then it'll be you. I will say a few words and then you and Discord will say your vows and exchange rings. Then you will begin with the mating ritual."

Fluttershy gulped. "Is it going to…hurt?"

Rarity momentarily stopped what she was doing. She glanced at Twilight before answering.

"Well, um…I was barely conscious when I was uh…"

"Don't worry," Twilight said quickly. "The Master's done this before. When I was sick, and I asked him to change me, he was very careful. It might…pinch a little at first, but it'll be over before you know it.

"Now," she leaned in closer. "This is very important. Discord cannot fully change you unless you give him precise verbal permission. Once you do, he will bite into your neck and drain a small amount of blood from you. When he's done, he will open one of his veins for you to drink, and you *must* drink without any help from us. It doesn't have to be a lot, just enough to contract your souls together."

"Wait," Fluttershy interjected. "Souls?"

Rarity huffed. "Contrary to popular belief, we vampires aren't soulless. You think we'd have feelings if we were soulless?"

"It's not that we don't have souls," Twilight explained, "but that we can lose them. Has Discord explained to you what happens when the mating ceremony is conducted without the consent of both parties?"

Fluttershy cringed and nodded.

"Well, when that happens, it does more than just bind one soul to another. The unwilling party is obliged by the faulty mating contract to do whatever their master or mistress demands. They can never be unfaithful, in more ways than one. If one ever disobeys their master, for instance if their master is killed by the slave's own hoof, then that slave's soul will evaporate. They will lose any sense of morality they'd ever had. Whatever feelings they had before will never return.

"Some say such an action also affects the mind, for the forced mating ritual gives the master full access to the slave's thoughts. Any disobedient act can give the slave a migraine, even destroy some brain cells. But doing something so extreme as to murder one's own master, that is the ultimate act of insubordination and can make a vampire go insane."

Fluttershy looked like she was going to be sick.

"So it's a good thing you are doing this out of your own free will!" Rarity chirped. "The Master of course would never do something so vile."

"Would Trenderhoof have done that to me?" Fluttershy murmured.

The two vampires glanced at each other.

"We…can't be sure, darling," said Rarity.

The door to Rarity's workshop burst open and Pinkie and Applejack wheeled in a white five-layer wedding cake frosted with roses and bearing a topper resembling Fluttershy and Discord in a tight embrace.

"Who wants CAAAAAAAKE?!" Pinkie screamed.

"Shouldn't that be for after the wedding?" Fluttershy inquired.

She shook her head. "Not when the only chance you'll ever have to eat it is before!"

"Vampires can't eat real food," Applejack reminded her.

Pinkie sighed. "Too bad. This cake looks really good." She grinned at Fluttershy. "That's why I brought it up here! This would be perfect for your last meal!"

"Last meal?" Fluttershy uttered.

"Sorry, Pinkie," Rarity huffed. "We're not getting frosting on this gorgeous gown!"

Pinkie rolled her eyes. "Why do you think I brought *napkins* ?"

"Regardless, I'm not finished here!"

"Don't worry, got it covered!"

She tied a napkin around Fluttershy's neck and before the pegasus knew it, cake was being shoved into her mouth.

"How does it taste, how does it taste?" Pinkie asked eagerly.

Fluttershy took a moment to chew on the cakey concoction and swallow it. "Is that…vanilla cake with buttercream frosting?"

"Yup! Somehow I figured you were the light buttery type! Here, have some more!"

More forkfuls came before Fluttershy could agree.

"Smaller bites, Pinkie Pie!" Rarity exclaimed as she worked on the gown's sleeves. "We don't want to choke her!"

Pinkie grumbled as she scooped a smaller piece onto the fork. "Fine!"

Fluttershy ate the cake contently, savoring each sweet bite and solemnly thinking about how this would be the last real food she would ever eat.

"Girls?" she said after swallowing. "Do you think…I'm doing the right thing?"

Pinkie scoffed. "Of *course* you're doing the right thing! The Master loves you and you love him and you're gonna live happily ever after! Nothing could be righter than that!"

"I mean," Fluttershy gulped, "am I making the right choice in…doing this for him?"

"Fluttershy," Applejack said, lightly touching her shoulder. "I know I haven't been the most…supportive about this, but I know that if ya don't do this, you could end up in the hooves of a stallion who doesn't care about yerr feelings. Discord does. You won't just be his mate. You'll be his equal, his partner for life. Of course, it's not too late to back out if you're not ready. This will only happen if ya really want it. But frankly, the love you and Discord have is something rare and beautiful, even if it means there will be hardships." She sighed. "I wish we could be so lucky."

"I might!" Rarity said. "Do not forget about Fancy Pants."

"I wonder what my true love will be like," Pinkie said, tapping her fork on her chin. "Maybe he'll be a jester, or a musician, or," she

gasped, "A PARTY ANIMAL LIKE ME!"

Rarity chuckled. "If I could live to see the day that you find a stallion who can handle your…personality."

Pinkie looked between Twilight and Applejack. "What do you think your true loves will be like?"

The two of them rubbed their necks awkwardly.

"I…don't think there's any pony out there for me," Twilight replied. "Flash was the only stallion I'd loved. I doubt any pony could replace him."

"Aw, don't be silly, Twilight!" Pinkie said. " *Every* vampire is destined to have their spectacularly perfect soulmate!"

"I don't…"

"I'll bet yours is a real bookworm! That way you can read books together, shop for books together, talk about books together! Ooh! I bet he's a totally amazing magic user too!"

Rarity snickered. "And Applejack's mate will probably be some pony who really loves apples."

"Okay, okay, y'all have had yerr fun," Applejack said with a grunt.

Rarity ignored her as she continued sewing with prudence. "One more stitch and…done! Now all that's left is the veil!"

She removed the napkin so Fluttershy could get a better look at her gown. Rarity had expanded the waist so she wouldn't have to wear the corset, lowered the neckline and cut off the shoulder puffs. The dress was now snug but comfortable and light on Fluttershy's body. The bodice now bore an intricate sparkling pattern resembling spider webs, as did the lace on her forelegs. Once Rarity lowered the veil onto Fluttershy's head, the look was complete. The tulle was delicate and much lighter than that on the other veil. Flinging it over her face, she had no trouble seeing her elegant reflection.

This was it. Her entire mortal life had been built up to this moment.

When she looked in the mirror, she was not ashamed of what she saw. No longer was she a meek little filly, but a strong, confident mare who was ready to make the most important decision one could ever make.

And she was certain she was ready now, ready to dedicate her life to another.

"Oh, darling!" Rarity fawned. "You look absolutely *beautiful* !"

"Like a princess!" Pinkie piped.

"Does this mean we're almost ready?" Twilight asked.

Fluttershy nodded firmly. "Yes."

"One second!" Pinkie said, whizzing off. "I gotta put the finishing touches on the ballroom!"

The ballroom was glowing. The floor was sparkling clean, the chandelier shone brightly from above, and the walls' pillars were strung with morning glories, which seemed to also give off light.

"How did you get those flowers to glow like that?" Twilight inquired.

"Oh," Pinkie shrugged, "a little florescent dye and ultraviolet light from the candelabras and boom, Bob's your uncle! My uncle's name is Chester!"

Rainbow scratched her head. "Florissa ultrapurple… *what* ?"

"Pinkie," Discord said in awe. "It's…perfect."

"You're welcome!" Pinkie chimed. "No need to give me a pat on the back, I'll do it myself!"

She reached over her shoulder and patted herself.

"Come on, let's get into our places," Twilight said.

She and Discord made their way to the middle of the room. He was

dressed in the finest suit he could conjure, complete with a neat pressed black jacket, a smooth white shirt and a crooked black bowtie. Twilight adjusted it with her magic. Pinkie took a seat at an enormous pipe organ, which apparently had been acquired during her shopping trip.

"How did she get that in through the door?" Spike whispered to Applejack as he helped her roll in what was left of the wedding cake. It would be finished by Spike and Scootaloo later.

Scootaloo stayed behind the doors, carrying a basket of flower petals and scratching at the fancy pink dress Rarity had thrown together for her.

"What do I have to do again?" she asked Rainbow Dash.

"Just wait for the music to begin and throw the petals around."

"Why?"

"I don't know, Rarity insisted on a flower filly."

Said unicorn came up to them, holding Fluttershy's train. "Are we nearly ready?"

Spike hustled out, careful not to drop the pillow bearing the rings. "We're ready."

They all turned to Fluttershy, who gave a determined nod.

"Okay, I'll tell them to start," Rainbow said, flying back into the ballroom. "All systems are a go!"

"Then we'll begin," Twilight said, tilting her head towards Pinkie.

Pinkie smiled cheerfully as she stretched out her hooves and brought them down hard on the keys, creating a very loud chord that shook the room. Every pony covered their ears.

"PINKIE!" they all cried.

"Sorry," Pinkie snickered, retracting her hooves. "Couldn't resist.

Okay, for real this time!"

As she began playing the wedding march, the double doors opened. Scootaloo trotted towards Discord and Twilight, swinging the basket around and flinging about its flower petals. Next came Spike, who held out the rings on a cushion as he proudly followed Scootaloo. Then the music became more powerful and all eyes were on Fluttershy. Discord stiffened at the sight of her.

Through the veil, he could see her incredible teal eyes, which were shining brighter than anything else in the room. She sent him a smile, and Discord nearly toppled over at how beautiful she looked.

"Whoa!" Twilight said as she caught her master. "Are you alright?"

"Uh-huh," he said, nodding dumbly.

Before he knew it, Fluttershy was standing in front of him, everyone else moving into a line to watch. She held out her hoof and he gently took it.

"Friends, vampires, mortals," Twilight began, "we are gathered here today to witness the eternal union between this draconequus and this mortal mare. As it has been foretold, each vampire is destined for one true mate whom he will love unconditionally, and she will show her loyalty by sacrificing her mortal life, for no bond is more sacred than that of two beings sharing their life essence so that they may become one entity.

"Of course, love is never easy." She glanced briefly at Applejack. "It takes work, it requires sacrifice. But it is all worth it in the end if it means being with the one you treasure above all else."

Applejack looked down at Spike who was standing ecstatically beside her. Twilight turned back to Fluttershy and Discord.

"Do either of you have anything to say before we begin?"

Discord swallowed the lump in his throat and took a deep breath.

"Fluttershy," he paused, "before I met you…I was suffering from eternal torment. I've never experienced the joys of a mortal, normal

life. Sometimes I didn't even feel like I was alive, like I didn't mean anything to anyone." He glanced at the mares. "Despite what my friends told me.

"But then you came along and…I finally had a reason to live. I…I don't feel like a monster when I'm with you, but like…a real person." He frowned slightly. "And before we go through with this, you should know that it's not too late. Your life is precious and you don't have to waste it with me.

"But, if it is what you wish," he lifted her hoof to his chest, "I will spend every moment of my existence making sure that you are happy and provided for. If we are to live our lives like this together, then let us make the most of it. I love you, and I will never stop loving you, even after I'm nothing but a pile of dust."

Pinkie had to pull a handkerchief out of her bodice.

"And you?" Twilight said, turning to Fluttershy.

The bride breathed. "Discord, I know you've done horrible things and I know you've suffered a lot. But I am here to assure you that your past doesn't matter anymore, because I am here and I am never leaving you again. Don't think you are taking my life away. Even though my heart was beating, I wasn't living either before I met you.

"All I did was go through the motions, do what others told me to do. Never once did I think for myself. Then you showed up and opened a door of opportunity. You love me, you respect me, you make me laugh, you actually care about what I want. Well, I want one thing, and that is to spend the rest of my life taking care of you and letting you take care of me."

She threw back her veil so he could properly see her smile. "Fate may have brought us together, Discord, but I brought myself here, to this moment. I love you, and I can't wait to be your wife, no matter what the future holds for us."

Tears were welling up in Discord's eyes.

"Very well then," Twilight said with a grin. "Discord, do you take

Fluttershy to be your vampire mate for all eternity and promise to treat her as your equal in every way possible?"

Discord sniffed. "I do."

"And do you, Fluttershy, agree to let Discord drink of your blood, and for you to drink of his, to become his vampire mate for all eternity and promise to treat him as your equal in every way possible?"

Fluttershy boldly locked her eyes onto Discord's. "I do. From here on to eternity."

Twilight looked to Spike. "May I have the rings, please?"

He held up the cushion and Twilight levitated the rings. The smaller ring, a gold one embedded with onyx stones, fitted onto Discord's claw finger. The larger ring, which was a plain gold, was placed on Fluttershy's hoof with her engagement bracelet.

"And now," Twilight said, taking a step back, "you may begin with the mating ritual."

Discord grew very nervous as Fluttershy leaned her head to one side, exposing her neck. Reluctantly, he took her into his arms and lifted her very slowly until their chests met.

"Not too late," he whispered.

Fluttershy raised her hoof to caress his face and as she smiled at him assuredly. "It's alright, Discord. Do it. I want you to."

He took her face in his claw and gazed at her sadly, tracing his talon along her rosy cheeks and taking in their warmth. For a long moment he focused on her eyes and how innocent they were. He couldn't do it. Not to this perfect angel.

"Discord?"

He winced. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. Don't feel bad for me. Just do it."

It was no use. She had already chosen. Sighing, he kissed the top of her head.

"I love you."

As he slowly dipped her, Fluttershy allowed her head to loll back. He pulled down the shoulder of her dress and leaned towards her throat. Her eyes fluttered closed as she felt his cold lips on her skin. Discord shut his eyes too as he made his fangs come out.

Fluttershy gasped at the sudden pain in her neck, her eyes flying open. As he sucked on the puncture wounds, she could feel her blood rushing out of her and into him. She gripped Discord's arms as her muscles weakened. The experience was frightening and exhilarating. She almost screamed at Discord to stop but knew she could trust him.

She tasted so sweet. Discord was close to draining her completely. Then he heard her short, terrified breaths and remembered who he was drinking. Tearing himself away, he stared in horror at the blood dripping from the tiny twin holes in her neck. His claw flew to his lips and found the same blood.

What had he done?

"Master!" Twilight said urgently. "She has to drink your blood too!"

"Oh, right!"

Discord ripped open his shirt and slashed his claw across his chest.

"Aw, and that was such a good suit!" Rarity said with a pout.

"Fluttershy!"

He lifted her head and saw that her eyes were half-closed.

"Mmm-hmm?" she said absentmindedly.

He urged her towards the gash in his chest. "You have to drink, but *you're* the one who has to do it. I can't make you."

She moaned inwardly. "So…tired…"

"Yes, I know. But you have to stay awake long enough to drink or it's not going to work. Just a little. You can do it."

Fluttershy struggled to open her eyes and directed them towards his chest. Gripping his arm, she lunged forward and pressed her mouth over the gash. Discord inhaled sharply as she sucked. Closing his eyes blissfully, he clutched her head in his claw to keep her in place.

The blood was warm in her mouth, and tasted surprisingly…good. She didn't know if it was due to her pre-transformative state or her dizziness, but she just couldn't seem to stop. Meanwhile Discord was groaning in pleasure. Scootaloo's and Spike's eyes had been covered the whole time by Rainbow and Applejack, respectively.

Finally, Fluttershy pulled away and fell limp. Twilight used magic to bandage up Fluttershy's neck and Discord's chest while Rarity summoned a handkerchief to wipe their mouths.

"How do you feel?" Twilight asked.

"Dizzy," Fluttershy heaved exhaustingly.

"It feels that way at first," said Rarity. "You just need some rest."

"I'll take her up to our room," Discord said.

He swung his bride's legs into the crook of his eagle arm while keeping his paw beneath her back and clutching her close so that her head was rested on his chest. He carried her out of the ballroom, into the foyer, up the marble stairs, down the hall of bedrooms, up the spiral staircase and to his chamber door. Twilight and Applejack had followed him to make sure Fluttershy was alright.

As he opened the door, Fluttershy's eyes were hit with light and she squinted into the room. The walls were adorned with garlands of white roses, candles were floating all around and in the middle of the floor was a large, open white coffin. Inside, two lacey pillows lay side by side.

"You've redecorated," she muttered.

"Well, I knew you would've preferred sleeping on the floor," Discord said, carrying her towards the casket. "And until you're fit to go to Zebrica, you need a proper place to sleep."

She moaned softly as he lowered her into the box, gently laying her on the far side.

"Rest, my sweet bride," he whispered as he brushed a stray hair out of her face. "When you wake, you'll be a new pony."

After planting a light kiss on her forehead, he stood up.

"You're," she breathed, "not staying?"

He turned back to her in surprise. "You're exhausted, my love."

"But…aren't we married?"

His eyes widened. "Fluttershy, you're hardly in a condition for us to be…"

"Just stay with me, please?" She gazed up at him. "Please, Discord? Stay with me? I'm…I'm scared."

Discord turned to Twilight and Applejack, who were waiting in the doorway.

"Don't disturb us unless it's an emergency."

The two nodded and slowly shut the door. Discord knelt down and crawled into the coffin with his beloved, coiling his body around her. She smiled sleepily as she curled up against him.

"Don't leave me," she whispered.

Discord grinned as he held her close. "Never."

He shut his eyes as he willed the coffin lid to slowly fall over them.

We have about five or six chapters to go!

Confrontations

Trenderhoof knocked on the door to Fluttershy's room. "Rise and shine, my beautiful bride-to-be! Hurry up and get into your gown! We don't want to be late for our appointment at City Hall!"

No answer came.

"Fluttershy?"

Putting his ear to the door, he listened for any signs of life. There was not even a single breath. He turned to Lady Starlight.

"Unlock it."

The hypnotized mare levitated the key out of her gown and turned it in the lock. Trenderhoof threw the door open and scanned the room. The bed had not been slept in, a veil lay crumpled on the floor with other bits of torn fabric, and the window was wide open.

"My lady?" he called stepping further into the room.

He sniffed the air and caught a scent he did not recognize, but could definitely tell it belonged to a vampire.

"No," he said. "NOOOOOO!"

"Fluttershy?" Starlight uttered, blinking in disorientation. "Where's… where's Fluttershy?"

Trenderhoof grunted furiously. "She's gone!"

"Gone?" Her voice became panicky. "My niece is… *gone* ?!" She gasped. "This…this is terrible! Where could she have gone?! Has she been kidnapped?! Did she run away?! How did she get out?! I… I must call the police!"

"No!"

Igniting his horn, he made Starlight lock gaze with him so he could

recast the spell. Mind control only worked to an extent and sometimes wore off when the victim remembered something important.

If Fluttershy was where he thought she was, Trenderhoof couldn't have the police involved. This was strictly vampire business.

"We do not need the police," he told Starlight.

She nodded dumbly. "We do not need the police."

"That's right. Now, you just go tell the servants that Lady Fluttershy is missing, but not to panic. I have everything under control."

She nodded again. "Not to panic. You have everything under control."

Turning around, she marched obediently out of the room. Trenderhoof growled in frustration as he sent a telepathic message to his comrades: *Girls, Bulk, come to Lady Fluttershy's room, NOW!*

A few minutes later, the Dazzlings and Bulk were searching the bedchamber while Trenderhoof and Sunset stood by the door and watched. The latter wore a smug look.

"You should've married her last night when you had the chance."

Trenderhoof rolled his eyes. "It would've been too suspicious. We needed time to prepare."

"A lot of good it did you hypnotizing the aunt. You should've focused more on the mare. Though," Sunset chuckled, "I give the girl credit for having the stomach to skip out at the last minute."

"We don't know if that's what happened." He looked to his servants. "Found anything useful?"

Aria shrugged as she closed the drawer to the desk. "No note saying she ran away, or one for ransom."

Adagio sniffed the ripped pieces of cloth. "These are from the wedding dress. Judging by the scent, she did this herself."

"This bed is *really* soft!" Sonata said as she sprawled out on the mattress.

Trenderhoof shook his head. "Bulk? What do you smell?"

The muscular stallion gave the window seat one last whiff. "Count Discord's definitely been here. I recognize his scent from the dinner party. It's all over the place." He went over to the bed and inhaled deeply. "Especially over here."

Trenderhoof's eyes widened. "She *didn't* !"

Sunset let out a hearty laugh. "Oh, ho, ho, *snap* ! I didn't think the girl had it in her! She *really* kicked you in the crotch, didn't she?"

He stopped her laughter by using his magic to toss her into the side of the armoire. Sunset groaned as she rubbed her back.

"If I hear one more word of mockery out of you," Trenderhoof growled, advancing upon her, "then I will personally take a piece of that wooden wardrobe and shove it straight through your heart! Are we clear?"

Sunset gulped. "Y-Yes, sir."

"Good." He heaved a calming breath. "Alright. So we can deduce that Count Discord had something to do with this. The question is, did he help her escape, or did she do it on her own?"

"But how?" Aria asked. "The door was locked from the outside and there's no rope or ladder coming out of that window."

"Maybe she flew?" Sonata suggested.

"She can't fly, dummy, remember?"

"Hmm," Trenderhoof pondered, glancing out the window. "Perhaps one of those street urchins saw something last night. We should ask around."

"What about Count Discord?" Sunset asked, rising to her hooves. "He's obviously behind this. Shouldn't our first step be to check out

his place?"

"We don't know if he took her for sure. If he is the leader of this vampire coven, we can't risk anything until we are absolutely certain he has her. For all we know the Lady Fluttershy could've escaped to an inn somewhere in town."

"But…"

"No 'buts'!" he barked at her. "You will do as I say! Come on."

As the others filed out of the room, Sunset grumbled to herself. "You never listen to me."

"Thank you, Zecora!" Twilight said as she exited the witch's hut. "We really appreciate it!"

She slid the bundle holding the garlic charm into her saddlebag. Even when wrapped up, being so close to it made her feel tingly. She ignored it however as she trotted down the street.

"She gave you some gold the other day! Surely if she came by again, you would've seen her!"

Twilight paused at the familiar voice and turned to the alley it was coming from. As she got closer, she saw a stout Romane unicorn stallion and a young mare who looked like she could be his daughter cowering against the wall. Facing them was a unicorn mare with a fiery red and yellow mane.

"She was very kind," the mare said, "but we have not seen her since!"

"Yellow pegasus mare," their interrogator said in frustration, "long pink mane, possibly in a torn wedding dress, may have come out of a window in that big house over there?!"

"We didn't see her!" the father insisted. "We were at the inn last night!"

The fiery mare ignited her horn and magically thrust the two to the wall. "Liars! As if you stinking urchins could afford an inn! You gypsies really are pathetic! It's no wonder every pony hates you!"

Twilight scowled at the scene. Even though getting involved in this could be risky, she couldn't just walk away from this act of injustice. She stomped towards the interrogator and planted her hooves firmly on the ground.

"How *dare* you speak to them that way?!"

The mare stiffened and spun around, her brilliant green eyes boring into hers. She dropped the Romane pair.

" *What* did you say?"

"I *said* ," Twilight repeated, advancing on her, "how *dare* you speak to them that way?!"

The fiery unicorn came up to her until they were nose to nose, their eyes glaring unblinkingly at each other. Suddenly, her adversary smirked and drew back.

"Almost didn't recognize you in the light, Lavender."

Sunset used her hoof to flick Twilight's chin, momentarily catching her off-guard. But Twilight stood her ground and narrowed her gaze at Sunset.

"Wasn't hard to recognize you, Phoenix, with your overconfident, snarky attitude."

Laughing, Sunset circled her. "Oh, I missed your witty remarks. Your mortal guise looks good on you. Somehow I'm not surprised your eyes are purple."

"Somehow *I'm* not surprised you spend your time patronizing ponies who are less fortunate than you." Twilight glanced at the two Romanes and tossed them some coins. "Go get something to eat."

The father and daughter muttered their thanks before scampering away. Sunset snorted in annoyance.

"Didn't take you for a self-righteous do-gooder."

Twilight shrugged. "Didn't take you for a spoiled, narcissistic aristocrat."

Her adversary gawked. "Ah! Do you *know* who I *am* ?!"

"I know exactly who you are," Twilight said, straightening up. "You're Lady Sunset Shimmer of Bullarest, sister to Count Trenderhoof, or so you claim. Considering your Siren friends said there were five in your coven and that you claimed to have a mate, it would seem that your siblinghood with Trenderhoof is merely a façade so that he can continue to seduce wealthy young heiresses in a massive gold-digging scheme so that you and your mate can become extremely rich while keeping your sick, twisted sexual relationship a secret."

Sunset blinked several times and then cackled. "I underestimated you. You really *are* a smart cookie!" She stepped towards her. "Since you seem to know everything about me, why don't we dissolve this mystery element between us and you tell me your name, hmm?"

Twilight glared at her in silence.

"Oh, come on! It's only fair! You know my name, I should know yours!"

"You seem smart," Twilight said, turning to trot away. "Figure it out yourself."

Before she could escape, Sunset swiftly moved to block her path. "Fine, don't tell me your name. But perhaps you can give me some other useful information, like the location of the Lady Fluttershy."

Twilight did her best to hide her guilt. "Her home, I presume."

Sunset huffed. "You would think, but she was scheduled to marry Trenderhoof this morning and she's mysteriously vanished into the night."

"Good for her." She turned away. "She has some brains."

Once again, Sunset would not let her leave. "Isn't it strange, though, that on the eve of her marriage to my Trenderhoof, she should disappear from her locked room, out an open window when she can't fly, with the scent of her lover Count Discord, *your* master, embedded in her chamber?" She leaned towards her. "You certain you don't know where she is?"

Twilight remained still, not taking her gaze off Sunset. "Even if I did, you won't get a word out of me."

The yellow unicorn shrugged. "Doesn't matter. We're sure to find her eventually."

"Good luck with that."

With a final grunt, Twilight pushed past her and continued on her way.

"I'd still like to know your name!" Sunset called.

"Too bad!" Twilight said, not looking at her.

"Then you shall continue to be Lavender!" She chanted mockingly, "Lavender, lavender, lavender! Lovely little Lavender! Lavender, Lavender…"

"My name's not Lavender!" Frustrated, she snapped around. "It's Twilight! Twilight Sparkle!"

She huffed as she stomped away, leaving Sunset with a satisfied smirk on her face.

"Twilight Sparkle," she mused. "A worthy name for a worthy opponent." She brought out the small bundle from behind her back. "She should really keep an eye on her saddlebag though."

Once she examined the contents of the bundle, she chuckled gleefully. The glorious confrontation she'd been waiting for would be soon, for now she had complete confidence in where the Lady Fluttershy was.

"I could've sworn it was in here," Twilight said as she rummaged through her bag. "I just had it!"

She and the other mares were in the gymnasium where Rainbow was teaching Scootaloo how to fence.

"Perhaps you dropped it?" Rarity suggested.

"No. I wrapped the charm up in a handkerchief and put it right here in my bag as soon as I left the shop."

"Maybe it was a pickpocket," Scootaloo said as she parried Rainbow's swing. "I used to do that before Mom told me it was dishonest. Cuteness is my best weapon anyway."

She shrieked as Rainbow's foil touched her chest.

"Not in battle, kid."

"No, if any pickpockets would brush up against me," Twilight said, "I would've…" She paused and then grunted angrily. "Sunset Shimmer!"

"Sunset Shimmer?" Rarity repeated.

"I encountered her in the market! She must've taken the charm when I wasn't looking and…" She stiffened. "Oh no. What if she knows what it's for and…?"

They all jumped when they heard a booming knock at the front door.

"You don't think…?" Pinkie said.

"It's gotta be them," Applejack whispered.

"She followed me here!" Twilight said with wince. "How could I be so *reckless* ?!"

The knock came again.

"What should we do?" Rarity inquired. "We can't answer it."

"Why don't we just tell them they've got the wrong castle?" Pinkie

suggested.

"Yeah," Rainbow said, rolling her eyes. "Genius, Pinkie. Except for one teeny problem. They've already met all of us!"

Pinkie looked down sheepishly. "Oh. Right. Well, maybe if we all stay really quiet, they'll think no pony's home and just go away!"

"Won't they just barge in?" Scootaloo asked.

"Vampires can't enter a home without permission," Rainbow reminded her.

"Oh yeah. Hey, what happens when vampires come into a home uninvited anyway?"

"Glad you asked!" Pinkie piped. "See, if we go someplace uninvited, all our blood vessels explode and blood comes oozing out all over our bodies like a trickling waterfall of death and…"

Rarity covered her mouth. "She doesn't need the details, Pinkie."

Scootaloo, however, looked excited. "Cool!"

The knocking grew louder.

"Maybe they will just go away," Twilight said, "as long as no pony answers the door."

"Uh, girls?" Applejack said worriedly. "Where's Spike?"

Every pony glanced around the gymnasium for the dragon, but saw that he wasn't present. Realization dawned upon them.

"Oh no," said Twilight.

Applejack was the first to rush out.

Spike approached the pounding double doors. "Hold your horses! I'm coming!" He opened it and gazed up at the six ponies standing there. "Can I help you?"

"Cool, a dragon!" one of the earth mares squealed. "Aw, he's so cute!"

The purple mare beside her nudged her harshly. "Quiet, Sonata!"

The unicorn stallion up front smiled and bowed. "Greetings, young dragon. Is this the home of Count Discord?"

"It certainly is," Spike said cheerfully. "Might I ask who you are?"

"I am Count Trenderhoof. This is my sister Sunset Shimmer and our servants."

Spike's smile vanished. "Y-You're…T-Trenderhoof?"

"Ah, you've heard of me."

He gulped. "Y-Yes."

Spike was feeling a mixture of terror and anger. Standing before him was the evil vampire who had destroyed the lives of his beloved Rarity and his friend Applejack. He had never been told the exact details of what Trenderhoof had done, because the mares didn't want to taint his innocence, but the dragon knew this villain was responsible for his friends' suffering. Every part of him wanted to burn the scoundrel to a crisp, but he was so frozen with fear that he couldn't produce any fire in his belly.

"May we come in?" Trenderhoof asked politely.

Shaking out of his thoughts, Spike replied, "Sorry, but Count Discord has forbidden me from letting any pony in today. You will have to come back tomorrow."

He started closing the door, but Trenderhoof stopped it with his hoof. He removed his spectacles and directed his gaze towards Spike, locking eyes with him.

"I think," he said, illuminating his horn, "you'll want to change your mind about letting us in."

The dragon stared at him a while and then blinked. "No, I don't think

I will."

Trenderhoof stiffened as he extinguished his magic. "W-What?" He growled. " *Again* ?! Are you kidding me?!"

"Let us handle it, Master," Adagio said, signaling her sisters.

Knowing what they were about to do, Spike quickly covered his earholes. But Trenderhoof used his magic to remove his claws from his head. The Dazzlings began singing a haunting melody in perfect harmony. Spike cocked his head at them.

"Uh…those are some really nice pipes and all, but we're not looking for any entertainment."

The Sirens gasped in shock.

"What?!" Adagio grunted. "How?! This had never…"

"Maybe it doesn't work on dragons?" Sonata suggested.

"Look," Spike said quickly, moving his now free claw towards the door. "I'm sorry you came all this way for nothing, but I really can't let you in."

"Ugh!" Sunset groaned. "Forget this!"

Her green aura surrounded Spike. He cried out and gripped the door to prevent himself from levitating towards her.

"You will let us in," Sunset said as she tried to pry him from the door, "or we will be having dragon pie for…"

"DON'T YOU TOUCH HIM!"

Applejack burst through the doors in her bat form and tackled Sunset, making her drop Spike. Before any pony could respond, Applejack grabbed the dragon and rushed back inside before the sun could singe her skin any further. Shoving Spike behind the door, she glared menacingly at the group.

"He is *not* for eatin'!"

Trenderhoof laughed. "Oh, so you're keeping pets now? Or are you raising him until he's big enough to feast on?"

She gritted her teeth together and prepared to pounce.

"Applejack, stop!" Twilight said, grabbing her with her magic.

Sunset smirked. "Hi, Lavender."

Twilight narrowed her eyes at her. "Didn't I tell you not to trespass on our territory?"

"Interesting you should say that," Trenderhoof said. "Didn't my Sunset tell you that we had a claim on the Lady Fluttershy?"

"She's not here," Rainbow said, appearing in the doorway.

"Isn't she?" Sunset said, levitating the garlic charm into view. "If my research is correct, this little bauble is supposed to prevent a newborn vampire from taking bat form in their early stages of transformation."

"Now why would you need a thing like that?" Trenderhoof asked. "Unless there's a new member of your coven?"

Pinkie's head popped out. "That's right, you goons! We beat ya to her! You can't have Fluttershy because she's already conducted the mating ritual with our master!"

"Pinkie!" Rarity hissed behind her.

"Oops."

Twilight sighed. "It's true. Fluttershy does not belong to you. She belongs to Count Discord now and he to her. You have no claim over her. Now, leave our land, or we'll have to force you off."

Sunset's smugness disappeared and she glanced worriedly at her mate. "Trend, if what they say is true and the Lady Fluttershy is now bound to Count Discord, there is nothing we can do."

Trenderhoof waved his hoof nonchalantly. "A mating bond is

nothing."

She stared at him in shock. "W-What?"

"It only lasts until one of them is dead," he grinned evilly at the mares in the doorway, "and that can easily be arranged."

Applejack took a step forward. "Is that a threat?"

He leaned toward her. "Once your master is dead, Lady Fluttershy will no longer be bound to him, allowing me to bind her soul to me."

Sunset looked at him in disbelief. "But Trend, you said you wouldn't…"

"I know what I said! But thanks to these little meddlers, there has to be a change in plans."

Twilight snorted at him. "We are not letting you get anywhere near our master, or our mistress, because we are not letting you in this castle!"

"So be it." He drew back. "If you won't let us in, we'll just have to stay out here."

"We've got all day and all night," Adagio chuckled throatily.

"Good luck finding food," Aria taunted.

"Guess you'll just have to eat your little dragon pet!" Sonata said with a laugh.

Twilight slammed the door on them. "I really hate those ponies."

Applejack knelt down to Spike. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "But I think they tried hypnotizing me. It didn't work though."

"It didn't?" Twilight asked, raising a curious eyebrow.

He shrugged. "Maybe that stuff doesn't work on dragons."

"Maybe," said Applejack, "but ya could've been… Ya should've been more careful!"

"Relax, okay?" He pulled himself out of her grasp. "I'm fine."

"What do we do now?" Rainbow inquired. "They sounded pretty serious about camping out there all day and night."

"I believe they were," Twilight agreed. "They've set the perfect trap for us. If we let them in, they'll be free to attack. If we try to leave, they'll be free to attack. Either way, we'll be fighting."

"But we can't stay in here!" Pinkie said. "We won't be able to hunt! We'll starve!"

"And with them outside, they'll be able to hunt all they want!" said Applejack. "They really *can* stay out there forever!"

"So it looks like we're gonna have to fight," Rainbow said, pounding her hooves together. "Bring it!"

"Not so fast," Twilight said before Rainbow could rush outside. "We have to think about this rationally. If we fight them now, we might not stand much of a chance. We fight best in our bat forms, but we can't change in the sunlight. Besides, if we fight out in the open, they might escape." She snorted angrily. "I don't want those Sirens to slip away from me again."

"But if we fight them in here, they might get to Fluttershy!" Rarity pointed out.

"But we'd have the advantage of fighting on our home turf," Rainbow said.

"And Trenderhoof won't be able to escape so easily," said Applejack.

"So what do we do?"

"We're going to need the Master's help," Twilight said. "His powers will be a great asset. I'll go ask him what he thinks we should do."

Meanwhile, outside, Sunset was arguing with Trenderhoof.

"You said you were just going to drink her! You never said anything about *mating* with her!"

"Well I can't very well drink her now that she's a vampire," Trenderhoof retorted. "Mating with her is the only way I'll be able to control her."

"But *I'm* your mate!" she shouted, pointing to herself.

"It'll only be temporary, my dear. I just need her in my control long enough for me to marry her and legally obtain her fortune."

She eyed him skeptically. "And *then* you'll get rid of her?"

"Oh, my little phoenix," he cooed, lifting her chin. "You know you're my best mare."

She stared at him aghast as he casually walked away. "That doesn't answer my question."

"You have nothing to worry about, darling," he said over his shoulder. "Haven't I always been faithful to you?"

She narrowed her eyes. "There's an easier way, you know. One less…suicidal? We don't know what we're up against. The mare's heavily guarded. But you still have her aunt hypnotized back at the mansion. She's a widow. You can just marry her for the fortune."

"Don't you get it?" Trenderhoof said, spinning around. "This isn't just about the money anymore! It's about the principle! Those vampires have stolen what is rightfully mine! I will *not* be humiliated!"

"Ugh! What is wrong with you?! Why are you so ignorant that you would so foolishly lead your coven right into a…?"

She shrieked as he grabbed her by the shoulders.

"You are out of line, missy!" he shouted into her face. "You forget who makes the decisions here and who carries them out!"

"But I am your…"

"THAT INCLUDES YOU!" He took a deep breath. "Now, be a good girl and go scout the terrain with Bulk. Make sure those mares have no way of escaping."

He pushed her away and she glared at him, but obeyed anyway. She went around one side of the castle while Bulk went to check the other. Adagio glanced at Trenderhoof as she sent him a telepathic message.

You're losing control of her, Master.

Yes, he responded. *She always was headstrong.*

She's not going to stay this cooperative.

Indeed. She's coming to a point where she won't care about losing her soul.

You need to dispose of her and soon.

Her magic is powerful. We'll need that if it comes down to war.

But she has a point. We don't know how powerful this coven is.

I know that, darling. He smiled smugly at her. *That's why I put in a call to Bullarest.*

Moments later, she was knocking on Discord's door. After she heard an annoyed groan, it opened.

"I thought I told you not to disturb us…"

"…unless it's an emergency," Twilight finished. "Well, it is. Trenderhoof and his coven are at our door!"

Discord stiffened. "Well, tell them to go away!"

"We tried, but they wouldn't listen. They want Fluttershy."

"Then tell them they can't have her, because she's my mate now!"

"We did, but they said it doesn't matter. They're…they're going to try and kill you and then Trenderhoof's going to perform the mating ceremony on Fluttershy."

He clenched his paw into a fist. "He can *try* ."

"Master, we might have to fight them. We need your magic."

Discord turned back to look at the pale bride sleeping in the coffin. "I…I can't."

Twilight blinked. "Why not?"

"I said I wouldn't leave her."

"But Master, if you don't do something…"

"I *am* doing something!" he snapped. "She is my mate now and my responsibility! She's scared about her transformation, and I have to be here when she wakes!"

She shook her head. "But you need to protect her from…"

"I'd still be protecting her! It'll be like…you girls are the knights at the drawbridge and I'm the dragon guarding the princess!" He looked at her pleadingly. "I can't leave her, Twilight."

She stared at him and then sighed in relent. "What do you propose we do?"

He stroked his beard. "Send out the white flag. See if you can reason with them."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"Then we go to battle."

"Okay, but we'll have to let them in for that. I can't lose the Sirens again, not after all this time."

"Do you think you can handle them?"

Twilight nodded. "There are six of them and five of us, but my magic's strong enough."

"And if they manage to get past you," he straightened up, "I'll be waiting for them."

"I'll let you know if there's any more trouble. Just protect Fluttershy at all costs."

He huffed. "You don't need to tell me twice." He knelt down and laid his paw over her shoulder. "I know you can do this."

She smiled and saluted. "We won't let you down, Master."

Once she had trotted down the stairs, Discord shut the door and looked back at Fluttershy.

"Don't worry, my darling," he said in determination. "That scoundrel won't be able to lay a hoof on you."

Trenderhoof and his coven jumped readily as the double doors to the castle opened. A small white flag stuck out through the crack.

"Are they surrendering?" Aria asked.

"This isn't a surrender!" Twilight called, stepping out. "This is a negotiation!"

Trenderhoof held out his hoof, signaling his associates to wait. "What are your terms, domnişoară?"

"Three of us will come out, and we will have a civilized chat. If any pony tries to fight, then the rest of our crew will come out. I should also point out that we are out in the sunlight, so none of us will be able to change into our bat form. And you know how we vampires are prone to lose ourselves in a fight."

Trenderhoof glanced back at the Dazzlings, who moved out of their attack formation. Then he looked to Bulk, who nodded, then to Sunset. She glanced momentarily at Twilight, groaned and silently

agreed with every pony else.

"We won't fight," Trenderhoof said, holding up his hooves. "You can come out."

Twilight emerged, still levitating the white flag. She came up to the notorious group, Applejack and Rarity following her on either side. Their eyes were staring at Trenderhoof like daggers. Twilight's attention was on the Dazzlings.

"Applejack," Trenderhoof scoffed. "Always a pleasure."

Rarity responded before Applejack could. "The only reason you're not dead now is because *some* of us are trying to be *civil* ."

He cocked his head curiously at the white unicorn. "And you are?"

Her jaw dropped. "You…don't… *what* ?! How could you not know who I am?! I'm Rarity! The mare you raped and sired a hundred years ago?!"

Scratching his temple, he said, "Still not ringing a bell."

"Are you *joking* ?!" she huffed, her eyes turning red. "How can you remember Applejack and not me?! We were engaged!"

"Oh, wait!" He smirked. "You were that clingy little seamstress, weren't you? Oh, you were *so* easy."

She charged for him, but Applejack held her back. "We're not here to fight, Rarity." She glared back at Trenderhoof. "Yet."

"As you can see," Twilight said steadily, "a number of us have personal scores to settle with you."

Sunset sneered proudly. "I *knew* you cared."

Twilight ignored her and turned to the Dazzlings. "I wasn't a vampire last time we met, but I can assure you that much has changed since then."

"Do we…?" Adagio said as she scrutinized her. "Wait." She scoffed.

"The Sparkle brat, of course!"

" *Twilight* Sparkle?" Trenderhoof said with a hearty laugh. "I remember! It was almost a year ago! You went looking for you parents' murderers." He narrowed his eyes. "You were just as nosy as they were."

"Hold on," Sunset said, looking between them. "You know her?"

"We've crossed paths, yes," Adagio smirked. "But we never had much time to get acquainted."

Twilight snorted in fury. "That's because you were too busy draining my fiancé of his blood!"

Sunset's eyes widened as she turned to the Dazzlings. "You killed her fiancé?"

"And her parents," Aria said with a grin.

"Oh, but that boy of hers!" Adagio exclaimed. "What a treat!"

"He was a cute one too!" Sonata giggled.

"I'll give you this, Sparkle, you certainly knew how to pick 'em." Adagio closed her eyes blissfully. "Ah, I remember it like it was yesterday. Pressed up against the wall, lying limp, gasping as I sucked on his neck, smiling as I drained the life from him…"

Applejack and Rarity each grabbed one of Twilight's forelegs as she leaped at Adagio, hissing wrathfully.

"YOU FILTHY WHORES! NOT ONLY DID YOU TAKE AWAY MY PARENTS, YOU HAD TO TAKE AWAY THE ONLY STALLION I EVER LOVED! YOU'RE MONSTERS! I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU!"

Her eyes had become redder than blood and her ears were growing furrier.

"Uh-uh-uh!" Adagio said, wagging her hoof and pointing to the sky. "Too sunny, remember?"

Applejack and Rarity pulled their friend back into an embrace and urged her to calm down. Twilight heaved several breaths until her eyes and ears were back to normal. Sunset had watched this spectacle in wonderment.

When Twilight was relaxed, she stood boldly before their adversaries. "So you understand we would like nothing better than to see you all disintegrated into dust."

"You flatter us," Adagio said, unfazed by her outburst.

"However, because we are reasonable ponies, we are giving you one last chance to turn around and leave us alone forever."

Trenderhoof threw his head back in a cackle. "And what makes you think we'll do that?"

"We hate y'all," Applejack said bluntly.

"We've spent years preparing your demise," said Rarity firmly. "Do you really want to see how much strength we've built up for this moment?"

"But if you leave now," Twilight repeated, "you just might live to see another day."

Sunset looked to her mate. "Trend, I think we should…"

"If you think we're just going to walk away and pretend this never happened," Trenderhoof said, stomping his hoof, "then your naïve sense of mercy has clouded your minds. This isn't just about Fluttershy anymore." He glanced slyly at Applejack. "We have some scores to settle too."

"So be it then," Twilight said, squaring her shoulders. "We didn't want it to come to this, but you leave us no choice. The extent of our mercy ends here. At sundown, we go to war."

Trenderhoof raised his chin. "Then war it is." He smirked at Applejack. "We look forward to it."

After sending one last collective glare, the three mares spun around

and marched back towards the mansion. Sunset watched Twilight, admiring her boldness and thinking about her passionate outburst.

"Twilight, wait!"

The lavender unicorn turned in confusion.

"Sunset, what are you doing?" Trenderhoof demanded.

"Just give me a moment with her," Sunset hissed. "Alone."

He looked between her and Twilight and nodded to the others. They dispersed into the trees and behind the mansion. Sunset walked up to Twilight, who looked extremely perturbed. Applejack and Rarity stood a few meters away from them.

"Look," Sunset said cautiously. "I…I didn't know the Dazzlings had done that to your parents and…your fiancé. If I had known, I… I guess I'm trying to say I'm…" She breathed. "I think it's horrible that they did that to you. If I lost Trenderhoof, I don't know what I'd…"

"Get to your point," Twilight grumbled.

Sunset looked at her pleadingly. "It doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to fight."

Twilight scoffed. "You've literally been *begging* for a fight since the minute we met!"

"I know, but…we don't have to be enemies." She leaned in closer. "Listen, we've got something big planned here. Once we've gained enough power, we'll be able to take control of all of Tramplevania, maybe even the *world* !"

Uninterested, Twilight asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because you could be a part of it. Aren't you tired of ponies oppressing you, tricking you into believing that you're nothing more than a weak little mare? You're not a weak little mare, Twilight Sparkle. I've seen how smart and powerful you can be. If you help us with our quest, we can show those misogynistic egomaniacs what we're *really* worth!"

Twilight stared at her, and then shook her head with a scoff. "You're really something, you know that? You say you plan to overpower the male population, yet you take orders from this sadistic *creep* !"

Sunset blinked. "You…you can't call him that! You don't even know him!"

"Apparently, neither do you. Didn't you hear what he did to Applejack and Rarity?"

She huffed. "That was before he met me. He had to get food somehow."

"What about Fluttershy? He blatantly admitted right in front of you that he plans to mate with her."

She bit her lip. "He…he's only after her for the money!"

"But to make her his mistress? Funny, I always thought vampires couldn't have mistresses after they've met their mates."

Sunset stood stock still for a long while. Then she shook her head.

"You don't know anything!"

"I *do* know that this *spell* of yours is not going to work."

She cocked her head in bewilderment. "Spell?"

Twilight stuck her snout in her face. "Trying to instill me with false emotions is just lazy and weak."

"What are you talking about?"

"You think a few ridiculous *dreams* are going to make me change my mind about you?!"

Sunset snorted. "Now I *know* you're crazy! Vampires don't have dreams!"

Twilight blinked back in surprise. If Sunset didn't know that vampires could have dreams, then that meant…

"You're not his mate."

Sunset scowled. "Stop it."

Twilight stepped closer. "Sunset, he's lying to you…"

"Shut up."

"He doesn't really love you…"

"SHUT UP!" Sunset began heaving heavily, her eyes reddening. "When we met, *Lavender* , I just wanted to spar with you, see what you were made of. I thought you'd be a nice challenge. But if you get on my bad side, our next meeting just might be *fatal* ."

Twilight grunted. "Whatever. Ruin yourself. See if I care. You're not my problem."

She snapped around and went back inside with her friends. Sunset glared furiously at the door, her eyes becoming redder by the second. Trenderhoof returned to her side.

"How did it go, dear?"

"I've decided," she heaved, "to go along with this little war."

"Glad you've changed your mind."

"On one condition." She turned sharply to him. "The lavender one is mine."

He smirked in amusement. "Do whatever you like with her, my love. Do whatever you like."

Yes, okay? I ripped off Sunset and Twilight's meeting in the human world in "Equestria Girls."

Vendetta

My old enemy. Action scenes.

The vampire mares spent the next few hours training in the gymnasium. Applejack was pounding hard on a punching bag, Pinkie was running laps at a rate of five per second, Twilight was teaching Rarity some basic defense and attack spells, and all of them would rotate in sparring with Rainbow. When sunset neared, Rainbow gathered them all to a blackboard.

"Alright, troops!" she said, slapping a pointer into her hoof. "We've got about an hour until sundown! We need to map out our basic attack formation. We're looking at five of us verses six of them here, but if we all stay alert, I think we can do it.

"Okay," she pointed to a chart with six columns, labeled with their adversaries' names. "What do we know about our opponents? Let's start with Trenderhoof. Strengths and weaknesses?"

"He's got magic," said Applejack.

"But he relies too much on his charm," Rarity grunted.

"Magic," Rainbow said as she wrote these down, "big ego. What about his right-hoof mare?"

"She's very smart," Twilight said, "and knows more about magic than Trenderhoof, I think."

"Good, good. Weaknesses?"

"She's very emotional and," she sighed, "thinks Trenderhoof is her whole world."

"Got it. Now how about the Sirens?"

"That Adagio's gotta be the smartest of the three," Applejack noted.

"She does most of the talkin'."

"The purple one's a meanie," Pinkie snorted. "I like the blue one the best."

"And we know she's not the brightest," Rainbow recalled.

"They're often together," Twilight said. "If we split them up somehow, they'll be easier to take on."

"That leaves us with the big guy. You saw those muscles. He's obviously the strongest."

"I'm not even so sure he's a vampire," said Rarity. "He smelled awfully strange, like…wet dog."

"So he's a big mystery," Rainbow said, drawing a giant question mark in Bulk's column. "Alright, now that we've established what we know, we gotta choose our targets. Since I'm our strongest fighter, I'll take on the big guy."

She wrote down her name under Bulk.

"The Sirens are mine," Twilight said firmly.

"But you can't take on three of them by yourself!" Rarity insisted.

"Yeah," Rainbow said with a nod. "One of us will be left without a target."

"Ooh, ooh, ooh!" Pinkie exclaimed, raising her hoof. "Can I get the purple one? I don't like her very much."

"Twilight?"

"Pinkie can help," Twilight agreed, "as long as I get Adagio." She narrowed her eyes furiously. "She's the one who killed Flash."

Rainbow scribbled Twilight's and Pinkie's names across the three columns. "All that's left is Trenderhoof and Sunset Shimmer."

They all turned to Applejack and Rarity. They both wanted

Trenderhoof, but they couldn't leave Sunset open. Who was going to have the pleasure of wiping out their greatest nemesis?

"Applejack should have Trenderhoof."

The orange mare gawked at Rarity. "Are ya sure?"

She nodded. "I may not be as powerful as Twilight, but I might stand a chance against Sunset Shimmer's magic. Besides," she turned to Applejack, "I feel like you need it more than I do."

Impulsively, Applejack threw her hooves around Rarity. The unicorn hugged her in return.

"Just as long as you let me get a piece of him before you kill him," she whispered.

"Agreed," Applejack said.

"It's settled then," Rainbow said, finishing her notes. "We've got our plan, now we just have to wait."

"Hey, what about me?" Scootaloo asked, raising her hoof. "Who do I kill?"

"And me?" Spike inquired.

The mares glanced nervously at each other.

"Spike, Scootaloo, we…" Twilight started to say.

"It's too risky," Rainbow said.

Spike stared at them all. "You're…not gonna let us fight?"

"It's not that we don't think that you're capable, darlings," Rarity said. "It's just that…"

"You're too fragile," Applejack choked.

"Fragile?!" Scootaloo shouted.

"Important. Y'all are too important."

"You're mortals," Twilight explained. "And you're young. You'll be the first ones they will go for. Even if you were armed, they could kill you."

"So," Spike said, stepping forward, "you're just gonna have us wait on the sidelines?!"

"To protect ya," Applejack insisted.

"I don't need protecting! I'm a big dragon!"

"And Rainbow's been teaching me how to fence!" Scootaloo declared.

"For one day!" Rainbow exclaimed. "I'm sorry, but this is a fight for vampires. We can't risk the two of you getting hurt."

"What about Fluttershy's bunny?" Pinkie inquired. "Won't it be dangerous having him hop around the castle while all this is going on?"

"There's no doubt about it," Twilight said. "We need to get everyone who has a beating heart someplace safe where the enemy won't get to them."

"You guys do that," Rainbow said, "I'll go find the rabbit."

Moments later, they were all gathered in Spike's room. Scootaloo sat on the bed, petting Angel as she watched Applejack nail wooden boards over the window. Twilight concentrated on the door, attempting to make it thicker.

"Seriously, is all of this necessary?" Spike asked.

Applejack spat out her hammer. "Once they have invitation, they might come through the window."

Twilight panted as she finished her spell. "And if they figure out you're in here, they might try to break through."

"They're just precautions, darling," said Rarity.

"But we wanna help!" Scootaloo insisted.

"Sorry, squirt," Rainbow said, ruffling her mane. "But you're too young to be out in the field."

She sighed. "I know, but I still wish I could help somehow."

"Y'all can help by keepin' quiet," Applejack said as she packed up her tools.

"If you hear any hoofsteps," Twilight told the mortals, "keep absolutely still and quiet. Hold your breath as long as you can. Don't open the door for any pony. If some pony tries to break it down, hide."

"What if we have to go to the bathroom?" Scootaloo asked.

Pinkie came in carrying a chamber pot. "That's what this thing is for!"

Spike and Scootaloo glanced at each other and shouted, "Gross!"

"Don't get me wrong," the latter said. "I've gone in worse places, but not with a boy watching!"

"Ugh!" Rainbow groaned. "Just turn around if ya have to! Now come on. The sun's almost set!"

The mares filed out of the room, Applejack and Twilight staying behind. The latter gave Spike one last hug.

"Once the door is locked," she told the dragon, "barricade it any way you can, just in case."

Planting a kiss on his forehead, Twilight got up and left.

"I still don't see why *I* have to be here!" Spike called, following the mares to the doorway. "I'm not gonna sit around while you girls are in trouble! I can help, I…"

"Spike," Applejack said, turning around to grip his claw in her hooves. "Listen to me. Some of us…might not make it through the night. So please, do us this one favor." She looked into his eyes

pleadingly. "Stay out of this. Stay here where it's safe. Please, I… *we* wouldn't be able to live with ourselves if ya got hurt."

He gazed into her eyes and was shocked by what he saw. They held so much sadness, so much awe, so much worry. Had her eyes always been this emotional, or was it because of the dire situation?

There was also something strange in the way she was holding his claw. Firmly, but carefully so she wouldn't hurt him, as if she were holding something precious, something she was afraid of letting go. He then remembered this was the way she had always held his claw whenever she took blood from him. He could tell. Neither of the mares wanted him to get hurt, but it seemed Applejack was more serious about it than the others.

Finally, he nodded in understanding and Applejack reluctantly released him. Her eyes never left him as she slowly closed the door. Her hoof was still on the knob as Twilight turned the key in the lock.

"He'll be fine," the unicorn said, putting an assuring hoof on her shoulder.

"Twilight?" Applejack murmured, facing her. "If I don't live through this, could you promise me somethin'?"

She nodded grimly. "Anything."

"Could ya watch over Spike?"

"Applejack, I've been watching over him since he was an egg."

"Then," she heaved, "could ya tell him…how I felt about him?"

Twilight blinked in surprise. "Of…of course, but…shouldn't you tell him now while there's still time?"

She glanced back at the door. "I don't want him to do anythin' stupid."

On the other side of the door, Spike was still dumbstruck, staring at the place he last saw Applejack, trying to figure out what he had just witnessed. Why had she looked at him so sincerely? Why had she

gripped his claw so tenderly? Why did she seem more determined than any pony to keep him safe?

"It's because she likes ya, dummy."

Spike snapped around to face Scootaloo on the bed. "Huh?"

The filly rolled her eyes. "What is it with you boys? I may be young, but even *I* can tell when a mare likes some pony. Or some dragon, in this case."

He scoffed. "Yeah, right. Applejack's just a good friend."

"Uh-huh," she said, raising an eyebrow. "But she likes ya. I mean *really* likes ya. That's why she doesn't want ya fighting."

He crossed his arms. " *None* of them want me fighting."

"Yes, but she especially doesn't want ya fighting. Didn't ya see the way she was looking at you? It's like you're the most important thing in the world to her."

Spike shook his head as he joined her on the bed. "You're crazy. If Applejack had feelings for me, she would've told me."

"Maybe she's too afraid that you'll reject her. You might not understand."

"Of course I'd understand! I know how vampire mating works! Vampires only fall in love once! If I was Applejack's soulmate, she wouldn't be able to touch me without…"

He paused as he recalled his first few weeks at the castle.

"Okay, so maybe she was a little skittish around me at first, but there have been tons of times where she didn't need my permission for…"

Then he remembered calling out on her squeamishness and saying she could touch him at any time.

"She was…probably just being polite. I mean, if I was her soulmate, she would've had to like fall in love with me at first…"

His earliest memory of Applejack returned to him, how when she had greeted him and Twilight at the door, she had stared strangely at him. Spike had presumed it was because he was a dragon, but could it be that…?

He thought back to all the times Applejack had acted protectively over him. Whenever he had to give blood, whenever he so much as scraped his knee or cut his finger on paper, she had acted as if he had been fatally wounded. Just this morning, when he was almost captured by Trenderhoof's coven, Applejack had rushed out in her bat form, risking being vaporized by the sun to save him.

Then there were those other, less dramatic times they'd spent together. When he had helped her in the kitchen and ended up making a mess, she hadn't scolded or laughed at him. Instead, she had just smiled at him and cleaned up the mess herself like it was no big deal. Every night when she would put him to sleep, she would tell him fairy tales modified so that the dragon would always be the hero instead of the villain. And she would let him chime in every now and then so it would be twice as fun.

He had never questioned any of this. He had assumed it was just because she was that kind of pony. But now, looking back on all those moments, he could see her smile and the adoration in her eyes. Then he mentally kicked himself for making those eyes sad every time he had mentioned Rarity. He clutched his chest as it began beating rapidly.

All this time, it had all been right in front of him. She'd been caring for him very deeply in any way she possibly could, and he hadn't even noticed.

The more he thought about Applejack, the more every physical feature of her seemed to glow. Her green eyes, so similar to his own, were like two precious emeralds. Her straw-colored hair now looked like golden threads sweeping over her shoulder. And her face, one he hadn't really paid attention to, suddenly looked very pleasing to him. She never wore powder. She had never made an effort to look beautiful. And yet, there was a raw natural prettiness to her face.

As minutes passed, he found he could think of nothing but Applejack.

"Uh, hello?"

When Spike snapped out of his daydream, he saw Scootaloo's hoof waving in front of his eyes. "Oh. Sorry, I was…thinking."

"Well, stop. We gotta barricade the door, remember? Come on, let's see if we can move that desk."

He didn't follow her immediately. "Do…do you really think Applejack…loves me?"

Scootaloo looked at him and shrugged. "I don't know much about love, but she definitely likes you. A lot."

Once again, Spike recalled his last time seeing her. "Then why didn't she say anything?"

The sun was set, the sky was dark, and the five vampire mares were standing readily in the main foyer.

"Remember," Rainbow said, "you can only kill them by removing their heads."

"Why can't we just use stakes and swords and garlic and stuff?" Pinkie questioned.

"Because it's too risky," Twilight said. "If we bring weapons to the battlefield, who's to say they won't steal them and use them against us?"

Pinkie pouted. "Fine. But it'd be a lot easier to chop off their heads if we had an axe."

"Don't worry. If necessary, I have a special sunlight spell that can evaporate a vampire instantly, but it takes a lot of energy and I don't want to accidentally hit one of you."

"But if ya wanna kill 'em," Rainbow repeated, "break their necks and rip off their heads."

"Got it," Pinkie said, still looking bored. "Break their heads and rip off their necks."

The pegasus sighed. "Close enough."

"Okay, Rainbow," Twilight said with a firm nod. "Let them in."

Rainbow saluted and zipped to the front door. When she opened it, the six foes were waiting.

"Alright, you punks. Come in and face your doom."

Trenderhoof grinned. " *All* of us can come in?"

She narrowed her eyes in annoyance. "Yes, all of you can come in."

"That is," he gestured to his associates, " *everyone* in our coven can come in?"

"Ugh! Yes, okay?! Everyone in your coven can come in, Mr. Specific! Sheesh!"

She quickly returned to her comrades in the foyer. "They're coming."

"Woo hoo!" Pinkie cheered. "Go Team Discord!"

The five of them stood in a line in the center of the room, keeping their eyes on the hallway their enemies would emerge from. They changed into their bat forms and readily bared their fangs. A minute later, Trenderhoof appeared, followed by Sunset, the Dazzlings and Bulk Biceps. They had all transformed, except for the muscular stallion. Sunset was glaring menacingly at Twilight, but she was too focused on the Dazzlings, who were floating beside their master and cackling in delight. Trenderhoof didn't look the least bit worried, even though Rarity and Applejack were growling especially at him.

"Where is Count Discord?" Trenderhoof inquired, glancing around. "Too cowardly to come and face me himself?"

"Our master has more important business to attend to," Twilight said stiffly.

"Last chance to surrender, ladies. We outnumber you."

Rainbow huffed. "Six against five is nothing! I've been trained to take on *way* more than that!"

He smirked. "Then this should satisfy you."

He let out a long whistle and various shadows stretched across the walls behind him. Discord's coven gawked as fourteen more vampire mares emerged from the hallway, hovering obediently above Trenderhoof.

"Your master's not the only one who's been collecting over the years!" he said proudly.

"Oh boy," Rainbow uttered.

"Wow, that's a lot of vampire ladies!" Pinkie exclaimed.

"It's okay! We can still take 'em! We'll just have to uh…" She tried counting. "Eight, ten…"

"We'll have to take on four each," Twilight declared.

"Right! I mean they're just normal vampires, right?"

As she said this, Bulk Biceps started to increase in size. The five mares watched in awe as his white fur turned black and his red eyes started glowing. His growing muscles ripped through his clothing and his snout became longer, suddenly sprouting a large wet nose. Claws sprang out of his hooves as they expanded into giant paws. In a matter of seconds, the muscular stallion had been replaced with an enormous, anthropomorphic black wolf.

"Okay," Rainbow whimpered. "Didn't see that one coming either."

"He's a *werewolf* ?!" Rarity gasped.

"But it's not even a full moon!" Twilight protested.

"That's no werewolf," Rainbow said. "That's a pricolici."

The lavender mare turned to her in surprise. "A *what* ?!"

"A pricolici. It's kind of what happens when a werewolf bites a vampire, or the other way around. He's got the same powers as a werewolf, but instead of changing only when the moon is full, he can change whenever he wants! He's also stronger and faster than any regular werewolf or vampire!"

Twilight blinked. "How do *you* know all this?"

"I'm a freaking Romane, these are like our bedtime stories!"

"So you see what you are up against," Trenderhoof said smugly. "I'll give you one last chance to hand over the Lady Fluttershy and your master so we can avoid this conflict."

The five huddled together.

"What do we do?" Pinkie whispered.

"Keep your targets," Rainbow commanded. "Just add three more to your hit list."

"That means I'm getting all the Sirens this time," Twilight said.

"Ya sure ya can handle Dog Breath over there?" Applejack inquired.

Rainbow shrugged. "Hey, I used to wrestle whole wolf packs for fun. We can do this."

They broke apart and faced their opponents.

"We will *never* betray our master and mistress!" Twilight said defiantly.

"So be it," Trenderhoof said, turning to his army. "Ladies, Bulk! Attack!"

They were like a shower of enormous bats, but the five met their foes bravely. Leaping forward and up in all directions, the two

armies clashed together. Twilight was about to shoot at the Sirens when Sunset tackled her.

"Finally, we get to have our battle, Lavender!"

"Out of my way!"

Twilight hauled her off with her magic and headed for the Dazzlings, but was prevented by another unicorn mare, a bespectacled light blue one with an icy blue mane tied into two sweeping ponytails and a bun on top.

"You guys are like, really dumb," she said bluntly as she countered Twilight's attack. "Like, seriously, you're just suicidal."

"Get back, Sugarcoat!" Sunset shouted, charging towards them both. "She's *my* kill!"

"Ugh!" Twilight grunted as she tried to shake the two unicorns off. "I don't have time for this!"

Rainbow collided instantly with Bulk. Unfortunately, she had misjudged his strength and he had her immediately pinned to the floor. He roared ferociously in her face.

"Blech!" she spat. "Get a breath mint, will ya? You've been eating too much goat!"

She kneed him in the crotch, giving her the opportunity to slip out from under him. Then she grabbed his tail and flipped him over. The pricolici let out a whine.

"Ha! How do ya like—whoa!"

Some pony else grabbed her by the tail and did the same thing to her. Rainbow glared up at a peach mare with an indigo mane streaked with turquoise thrown back in a wild style.

"Hey, no fair!" Rainbow cried as she charged for the mare.

Meanwhile, Pinkie was getting acquainted with the various vampires coming towards her.

"Hi, I'm Pinkie Pie!" she piped as she kicked one in the face. "I like parties!" She thrust out her foreleg and punched another vampire in the gut. "So nice to meet you!" With one swipe she knocked two in the jaw. "This is fun!" The first vampire came at her again, but Pinkie nonchalantly swung her back hoof under her knees, flipping her over. "We should do this again sometime!"

Rarity and Applejack were trying to make their way towards Trenderhoof, but his deadly harlots were blocking their way. Their master in the meantime was standing on the sidelines, watching the battle from a safe distance.

"And you say *our* master's a coward!" Rarity called as she zapped a vampire away. "You're not even trying!"

"Don't need to," Trenderhoof said. He turned to the Dazzlings who also had not yet joined the fight. "Fluttershy and the Count have got to be hiding somewhere in this castle. Spread out and search for them upstairs."

Adagio nodded and gestured to the other two. "Come, sisters."

"Aw, but I wanted to join the fight!" Sonata complained.

Aria grabbed her by the ear and dragged her upstairs. Twilight, who was still fending off Sugarcoat, Sunset and two other unicorns, saw the Dazzlings leaving the scene.

"No!" she cried, creating a large bubble to send her attackers flying backward. "I'm not letting you escape me again!"

Seeing what was going on, Rainbow called to Twilight, "Go!" She paused to buck the peach mare off her back. "We'll be okay down here!"

Twilight raced towards the staircase, but Sunset once again stepped into her path.

"Excuse me!" she said impatiently. "But we haven't finished our fight yet!"

Twilight grunted as she shoved her out of the way with her wing.

"Quit wasting my time!"

Sunset gawked as she watched her adversary chase after the Dazzlings. "Hey! You're supposed to be *my* archenemy!"

She was about to go after her when Trenderhoof stopped her with his magic. "Let her go, darling. The Dazzlings will take care of her."

"But," Sunset whined, "you promised *I* could have her!"

"Well clearly, she has other targets in mind."

Sunset looked angrily up the stairs. "Ugh, why do they always have to steal my toys?!"

By the time Twilight reached the top, the Dazzlings had disappeared. She glanced down the halls but they were empty. She decided to check the right hall first, where the bedrooms were. Walking cautiously, she listened for the Sirens, but all she could hear was faint breathing from Spike's room. She hoped he and Scootaloo were holding up.

Then her ear flicked as she heard a flap, but she looked up too late. Aria and Sonata pounced on her, each grabbing a foreleg. Adagio landed in front of her.

"Somehow we knew you'd follow us," she chuckled, tapping Twilight on the snout. "You're so obsessed that you're even willing to go up against us alone. Well," she sneered, "you've got your wish."

Twilight shot a sunbeam at her, but Adagio swiftly moved to the side.

"Now that's hardly fair." She stuck out her lip in a pretend pout. "Using magic against us simple earth mares who have to rely on our raw strength and good looks. Tsk, tsk. Poor sportsponyship. That deserves a penalty, don't you think, Aria?"

Aria snickered. "Oh, definitely."

She pulled down hard on Twilight's leg, snapping it out of its socket, making her cry out in pain. Grinding her teeth together, she shot at

Adagio again, but she ducked her head.

"Again? Oh, Sparkle. Why must you play so dirty?"

"Yeah!" Sonata exclaimed, twisting Twilight's other leg. "Dirty!"

The unicorn screamed, but kept her glare on Adagio.

"I see your tactic hasn't changed," the siren said, leaning closer to her. "Nothing but shoot, shoot, shoot. I really thought killing your fiancé would've made you a lot more passionate." She shook her head. "Oh, your parents would be so disappointed to see how pathetic you turned out to be."

Twilight couldn't hold it in anymore. Wailing in fury, she flashed a bubble to blast the Dazzlings away from her. While they were recovering on the floor, she used her magic to twist her right leg and push her left one back into place. With her vampire healing, the pain would subside in a few minutes.

Adagio was the first on her hooves, but Twilight didn't make that last. She engulfed her in magic and smashed her through one of the doors. Aria and Sonata pounced at the unicorn, but she fired another sunbeam at them, which struck Sonata's ear.

"Ow! Hey, I needed that!"

She shot at them once more, but they jumped out of the way. Twilight swooped into the now open room where Adagio had crashed into a mirror. She tackled the siren before she could get up again.

"You BITCH!" Twilight bellowed as she slapped her hoof across Adagio's face.

"Hey, you can't do that!" Sonata cried as she and Aria appeared in the doorway.

The unicorn's head snapped around, her eyes burning and her horn emitting dangerous sparks.

"STAY OUT OF THIS!"

The two of them shrunk back in fear as Twilight returned to Adagio, repeatedly striking her over and over.

"YOU'RE AWFUL!" *Slap!* "EVIL!" *Slap!* "A MONSTER!" *Slap!* "I HATE YOU!" Adagio's face was becoming purple. "YOU RUINED MY LIFE! YOU DESTROYED ME! YOU MADE ME A…"

Her hoof paused in midair as her eyes caught one of the shards of the broken mirror. In it, she saw a horrifying creature with hellish red eyes. Then she realized where she was: her room with the enchanted mirror, and the creature in the glass was her.

Except it wasn't.

She stared down at Adagio. Blood was oozing out of her nose and her she was shivering under her grasp. She looked truly frightened. Then she glanced back at the other too. Sonata was gripping Aria's foreleg as they both cowered in the doorway. Twilight glanced at her own hoof, which was stained with the siren's blood, then back at the mirror shard.

What had she become?

She shook her head. "You…you made me a…"

But it wasn't the Dazzlings. They had just taken away her family. They hadn't made her a vampire. That had been her. She had let herself become a monster. She had ruined her own life for revenge.

Adagio had been right about one thing. Flash and her parents would be horrified if they could see her now.

The Dazzlings didn't deserve to live, but killing them like this wouldn't make her any better.

Sighing, she rose off of Adagio and looked down at her regretfully. "Get out."

The siren blinked. "What?"

She pointed to the door. "Leave this castle and never come back."

Aria and Sonata were just as confused and looked to Adagio for answers. Their leader stood.

"Very well."

"Huh?" her sisters said.

Adagio sighed as she walked casually to the door. "Come on, sisters. We are not wanted here." She pushed the two of them out. "Clearly, you are the better vampire, Sparkle. I'm quite impressed." She glanced down and spotted some tiny pieces of glass. "So we will just be going and…"

Smirking, she kicked the shards backwards into Twilight's face. The unicorn yelped and covered her face with her wings before any glass could hit her eyes. When she removed her wings, Adagio was leaping towards her, hissing venomously. There was no more room for mercy as Twilight shot a sunbeam right at her heart.

The siren was dust before she even realized she'd been hit. Aria and Sonata gasped in horror. Twilight turned to them, igniting her horn.

"Any pony else?"

The two of them squealed and scampered down the hall. Twilight extinguished her magic and gazed down disappointedly at the pile of dust that was Adagio. It was strange, she had imagined killing the Sirens many times, but now that she had vanquished the worst of them all, she didn't feel any satisfaction. She felt pity.

She had tried to be the better pony, and Adagio had taken advantage of that. She had sealed her own fate.

"You should've run when you had the chance."

There's so much in this battle, it's gonna be split in two.

"Pricolici" pronunciation: *pree-co-leech*

I actually hadn't heard of a pricolici until after I left Romania. I tried looking up more but would you believe every site I found said the exact same thing? Like, word-for-word? Bottom line, it's a werewolf-vampire hybrid.

Since we have no confirmation of the pony race for the Crystal Prep students, I'm taking liberties here. For some reason I just saw Sugarcoat as a unicorn.

Cavalry

The hardest part of this chapter was figuring out which order the scenes should go in. So much stuff is happening at once!

While Twilight was facing the Dazzlings, the others were struggling to keep the army at bay. Rainbow was still wrestling with Bulk and the peach mare, but now two more vampires were leaping at her.

"How many have you gotten?" Rainbow called as she smashed her wings into the oncoming attackers.

"Does it *look* like we've had any success?!" Applejack bellowed.

She and Rarity were surrounded by a ring of six vampires, including Sunset. With every one that came at them, Applejack and Rarity would take turns bucking them off and putting up shields respectively.

"I'd rip their heads off," Pinkie shouted as she punched two vampires in the face, "but they just," she swiped both hooves but her adversary ducked, "won't," Pinkie dodged a kick, "stand," and missed another target, "STILL!"

Trenderhoof laughed. "You mares are in over your head!" He jumped to the side as one of Rarity's beams almost hit him. "Sunset! Cover me!"

Sunset groaned as she withdrew from the fight and went to her mate's side. "You can put up a shield yourself, you know?"

"I know," he said, examining his hoof. "I'm saving my energy for Count Discord."

Sighing, Sunset put up a green shield around them both.

"You would still hide behind your harlots?!" Rarity snapped.

"At least he bothered to show up to the battle!" Sunset retorted, turning to Trenderhoof. "Want me to summon a storm of fireballs? I could wipe them out completely!"

"Easy, Sunset," he said, patting her on the back. "You might accidentally destroy our troops. We need them for our plan, you…"

He grunted suddenly and put his hoof to his head with a wince.

"What is it?" asked Sunset.

Opening his eyes, he said, "Adagio. She's…gone."

She looked at him stunned. "Gone?"

"Dead. Gone. I can't feel her anymore."

Screams cut through the air as Aria and Sonata appeared at the top of the stairs and began racing down frantically. Trenderhoof signaled Sunset to put down the shield and went to meet them.

"What happened?"

"Oh, Master!" Sonata cried, throwing her hooves around him and burying her face in his shoulder. "Adagio! That awful lavender unicorn killed Adagio!"

"She did?" Sunset said, an impressed grin forming on her face. "How?"

"She just," Aria said, hyperventilating, "evaporated her! Into dust! We barely escaped with our lives!"

"That bitch!" Sonata sobbed. "She killed our sister! You have to punish her, Master!"

"Shhh," Trenderhoof whispered, tenderly stroking her head. "There, there, sweet Sonata. You'll get your revenge." He pulled away from her and turned to Sunset. "Seems we have a little problem upstairs, darling." He raised her chin. "Can you take care of it for me?"

Sunset's grin widened. "Oh, it'll be my pleasure, dear."

Twilight continued to stare at the pile of dust as she recuperated. Her front legs needed time to heal before she could get back into the battle.

It was strange to think that her greatest enemy had been here one minute and gone the next. Why didn't she feel anything? No relief, no remorse. Just wonder if things could've turned out differently.

This had been her first kill. Had she really changed so much from the vampire bite that she felt nothing from it? Had she transformed herself for this?

At first she concluded that she wasn't satisfied because the other two were still alive. But she felt like her revenge had already been taken out on them. Twisted as they were, Aria and Sonata loved their sister. They had killed her family, it was only right that Twilight take a part of theirs.

So if that's all that revenge was, what was she doing here? Why was she this immortal blood-drinking monster? What was there left for her to do for the rest of eternity?

Her pain had numbed enough so she could stand. It was best to return to the fight and help her friends. Slowly, she exited her room and came out into the dark hallway. Then she paused when she heard the faint sound of a horn igniting.

She put up a shield a millisecond before the beam could hit her.

"Nice deflection."

Twilight spun around to see Sunset at the far end of the hall by the spiral staircase. Her hooves were clapping slowly and her face was wearing a mischievous grin.

"That wasn't meant to kill you," she said, stepping towards her. "I just wanted to see what I was up against. Now I know." She chuckled throatily. "This is going to be *fun* ."

Still drained from her fight with the Dazzlings, Twilight shot a small

laser beam. Sunset pirouetted out of the way.

"Oh come on, Lavender," she said, crouching into a mocking plié. "You can do better than that."

Twilight flapped her wings and charged for her, but Sunset back-flipped into the air. Twilight narrowly avoided a crash into the wall.

"I've been looking forward to this," Sunset taunted, powering up her horn. "Don't disappoint me, Sparkle!"

As Twilight dodged her blast, she swooped beneath her foe and magically struck one of her hooves.

"Ouch!" Sunset cried out, spinning around. "Crafty! But let's not play such childish games, shall we?"

Bounding upwards, Twilight pounced on her and pinned her to the wall. Sunset smirked and swiftly bit her muzzle.

"Gah!" Twilight exclaimed, pushing herself away. "What happened to not being childish?"

Sunset shrugged. "What can I say? I'm playful."

She sprang at Twilight, who flapped around her and shot at her wing, but Sunset deflected the spell. Their horns clashed together.

"Not bad," Sunset mused. "But I'm just getting warmed up."

Aria had rejoined the fight, but Sonata was in such a sorry state. She was on the floor, clutching her master's hoof as he shielded them both when necessary.

Sunset , he said telepathically, *what's going on up there?*

I've got the lavender one busy, Sunset's voice replied in his head. *Wow, she's a tough one.*

Get rid of her as soon as you can. If not, keep her distracted while

we search up there.

Yeah, whatever. Sheesh, she's good!

"Alright," Trenderhoof said to the mare on the floor. "While Sunset's preoccupying the little twinkle guard, we'll search upstairs for the Count and his mate."

"I'm not going back up there!" Sonata whined. "That lavender one's scary! She called us bitches!"

"Master!" a pink mare with long green and yellow hair shouted, coming up to him. "We lost track of the pink one!"

"What?!" Trenderhoof exclaimed. "There's a dozen of you tackling four of them! Lemon Zest, how can you lose one of them?!"

Lemon Zest looked down sheepishly. "Well, we had her cornered but then she sort of…exploded."

He raised an eyebrow. "I beg your pardon?"

"Lemon Zest is poorly mistaken," a pale yellow mare with freckles and a pink mane streaked with blue tied in a ponytail said sweetly. "She didn't just explode instantly. She threw down a bunch of confetti bombs and took advantage of our momentary distraction." Her tone became gruff as she glared at her comrade. " *You should've grabbed her when you had the chance!* "

"Don't blame *me* for this, Sour Sweet!"

"Well don't just stand there!" Trenderhoof bellowed. "Find her! Three of you search upstairs and three of you search the adjoining rooms!" He shook off Sonata. "And would some pony please take her?!"

Two vampires dragged a weeping Sonata towards the ballroom while Lemon Zest, Sour Sweet and a unicorn raced upstairs. On the right they could hear Twilight and Sunset firing at each other.

"Not going down there," Lemon Zest said, moving to the left. "Check all the doors."

"Oh, certainly!" Sour Sweet cooed, before scowling. " *Who put you in charge?* "

But they didn't have to look for long as the door at the end of the hall popped open. When they turned, they saw Pinkie Pie aiming a small blue cannon at them.

"Come to join the party?" she piped, giving the weapon a click. "Sorry, but you weren't invited!" She paused. "Okay, technically you *were* invited but we didn't know Trenderhoof had you girls as deus ex machina backup…"

"Ha!" the unicorn laughed. "You think you can beat us with a *cannon* ?! Cannonballs can't hurt us!"

Pinkie smiled as she fired her weapon, spewing out a strange powder. The three vampires laughed until the tiny specks hit them and singed their skin. They wailed in surprise agony.

"That's right!" Pinkie cheered. "I loaded this baby up with garlic powder! Oh, but that's not all!" She snapped up her foreleg to reveal a crossbow nocked with a small wooden stake. "Say bye-bye!"

She let the stake fly and it hit the unicorn in the chest. She dissolved instantly into dust. Lemon Zest and Sour Sweet looked at Pinkie Pie in horror as she showed them a double-bladed axe with her other hoof.

"Retreat?" Lemon Zest squeaked.

"Nah, we can take her on," Sour Sweet said. " *Not* !"

They rushed down the hall screaming.

"You can run!" Pinkie called. "But you can't hide!"

Several heads turned as the two mares appeared on the staircase.

"Run for you lives!" Lemon Zest cried, waving her hooves frantically. "There's a lunatic on our trail!"

Applejack glanced at Rarity. "Where's Pinkie?"

As if on cue, Pinkie hopped onto the top of the stairs, laughing maniacally. She now wore a pink Japonyese karategi and a matching headband. Around her waist was a belt loaded with garlic bulbs, stakes and several other tiny weapons which were indeterminable at a distance. She sported the crossbow on her right foreleg and the axe in her left hoof. A rope attached to her tail dragged her cannon behind her.

"You're crazy!" Sour Sweet exclaimed.

"Correction!" Pinkie said, pointing her cannon towards the chandelier. "I'm *batty* !"

Her friends looked extremely worried.

"Rainbow!" Rarity cried. "I thought you confiscated all of her weapons!"

"Well how was I to know she'd find them?!" Rainbow said as she swished her wings around to ward off her attackers.

Applejack's eyes widened as a click was heard. "She's firin' her cannon! Rainbow, Rarity! Take cover!"

Cackling, Pinkie shot several puffs of garlic powder into the air, watching in excitement as it rained down on the battle. Vampires cried out as they were stung by the wretched dust. Trenderhoof and the other unicorns hastily shielded themselves. Rainbow used Bulk as her shield and flinched as he roared in pain. Applejack and Rarity managed to zip out of range, though a few flakes singed Applejack's tail.

"Pinkie, careful with that!" she called.

"You can't stop me, cronies!" Pinkie screamed as she swooped down, flailing her weapons. "I'm from the freaking ASYLUM!" A vampire cried out as her head was sliced off with the axe and she crumbled to dust. "That's right!" The crossbow struck another heart. "I'm an escaped," she tossed a mysterious ball in the middle of the room and whooshed out of the way, "INMATE!"

A few vampires watched the ball curiously. Once it hit the ground,

more garlic powder exploded in their faces.

"AND I'M PROUD OF IT!" Pinkie shouted, swinging her axe around.

"Pinkie!" Rarity cried as she ducked, the blade narrowly missing her. "Put those things away!"

"No, wait!" Rainbow said, kicking Bulk in the crotch. "Let her at it!" She dodged the peach mare as she charged at her. "That's the most we've killed," she bucked another vampire away, "so far!"

Rarity shrieked and ducked as the axe came at her again. "At least watch where you're swinging that thing!"

"Oopsies!" Pinkie giggled, before launching into the air. "Any pony else want some?!"

The enemy vampires yelped and tried to get as far away from the crazy mare as possible. Trenderhoof remained crouched behind the stairwell until Pinkie's back was facing him. He leaped out of his hiding place and dashed up the stairs. Applejack tried going after him, but Sonata returned and wrestled her to the ground.

Trenderhoof went down the right hall and found Sunset and Twilight still going at it.

"Sunset, hurry up and help me look for Fluttershy!"

"I will," Sunset grunted as she avoided a beam, "as soon as," Twilight deflected her shot, "I'm done," Sunset pounced at her, "here!"

The two mares entangled and twirled in the air. Trenderhoof slid under them and headed for the spiral staircase. Twilight spotted him and attempted to get away from Sunset.

"No!"

"Oh no you don't!" Sunset exclaimed, pulling her back into her hold. "We're not finished here!"

Trenderhoof smiled up the staircase. "Thanks for showing me the

way, Sparkle!"

He flew up and could hear Twilight struggling against Sunset. There was no doubt Fluttershy was up here if Twilight was so keen on guarding it. Reaching the door, he slowly opened it and peered inside. The room was lit by floating candles surrounding a large white coffin. Chuckling, Trenderhoof shut the door and cautiously approached the casket. His magic enveloped the lid.

Suddenly, a body came crashing down on him, stopping him from opening the coffin. Trenderhoof cast the stranger off with his magic and backed away. He gasped at what he saw.

" *You* !"

Discord smirked as he rose to his full height. "Nice to see you again, Travelhay."

He stepped back in fear. "You… *you're* Count Discord?!"

A bell appeared in the air and rang. "Give the stallion a prize! I'm surprised you didn't figure it out sooner."

"I…I thought you had devoured Applejack in the woods! I thought you were just another animal fighting for a meal! But no. You had taken her, kept her to be your slave instead of mine!"

Discord shook his head. "That's the problem with you, Travelhay. You assume every stallion, every *male* , to be just like you. But unlike you, I treat *my* mares with *respect* !" He whipped out his paw. "It's bad enough raping two of my friends, but trying to do the same to my wife?" An electrifying ball of golden light formed in his paw. "That *really* ticks me off!"

He threw the ball at Trenderhoof, who yelped as he zipped out of the way. The ball struck the stone wall, leaving a spherical dent in it.

"Admit it," Discord said, advancing upon him. "You couldn't face me last time. Who's to say you won't run away again?"

He created another electric ball, but Trenderhoof summoned a protective bubble. "Because this time, I have backup!"

Sunset, I need your help!

Still busy!

Come on! How long does it take to vanquish one measly little unicorn?!

I told you! She's good! Wow, what an impressive ice beam!

Trenderhoof grunted in frustration as he dodged another electric sphere. Then he sent out a message to all his mares.

Girls! I am in a severe pickle! It seems I have underestimated Count Discord's magical abilities! I need some of you to come up to the tower in the West Hall.

Several cries of protest echoed in his head.

Come up here if you want to get away from the crazy pink one.

As he heard some confirmations, Trenderhoof summoned another bubble for Discord's next attack. He needed to distract him until his backup came.

"You really think she's going to love you?" he cackled as he shot a beam at him. "A hideous monster like you?"

Discord split his face in two, allowing the beam to go through. "At least," he said, putting his head back together, " *I* wasn't in it for the *money* !"

Trenderhoof flew up as Discord fired again. "Oh, you could fool her with your pony disguise, but she's bound to find out what you really are sooner or later!"

The draconequus threw his head back in laughter, confusing the stallion. "That's where you're wrong, Tenderheart! Fluttershy's known what I am, what I look like, since the moment we met!"

Trenderhoof stiffened. "Then…then she…no! There is no way that impressionable young mare chose *you* over *me* !"

"Perhaps she saw what you really were," Discord said as two electric orbs formed in his paw and claw.

The stallion flew up to the ceiling before he could be hit. "But how?! How could she know exactly what you are and *still* run away with you?! Did you hypnotize her?! Is that why I couldn't do it?! Yes! There's no other explanation!"

"When you have a soulmate of your own," the draconequus said as he summoned a sword, "you'll understand!"

He bounced up and swung at Trenderhoof, who formed a long, solid magical beam from his horn to parry his blow. The two engaged in an aerial swordfight.

"Soulmate," Trenderhoof grunted as he thrust his magical weapon, "implies," Discord moved to the side, "that I," Trenderhoof swung, "have," Discord blocked, "a *soul* !"

That made the draconequus pause, allowing Trenderhoof to graze his lion arm. Discord cried out but managed to deflect the next blow.

"Did you really think," Trenderhoof said as they continued their duel, "I would really let some *mare* make me her little lapdog? It was humiliating! For years I was forced to do that seductress' bidding, all because she had made me drink her blood! What else could I do but wait until she was asleep and stab her in the heart with a wooden stake?!"

Discord stared at the stallion while summoning a metal shield to block his attacks. "You killed your vampire mistress?"

"Mmm-hmm," Trenderhoof said as he magically made an equally strong shield. "And the minute I put that stake in her heart, every feeling I ever had, every chance I had for love, was evaporated instantly!"

He charged at him, but Discord's serpentine body twisted past every blow.

"All because I let some mare rule over me!" Trenderhoof shouted as he cut through Discord's shield. "But never again!"

The draconequus scowled as he replaced his broken shield with a stronger one. "That's what this is all about? Gaining control over mares?"

The stallion smirked. "What better way to control them than to make them think that they are loved?"

Discord grunted as he struck from above, only to be blocked by Trenderhoof's shield. "What happens when they figure out your game?"

"I *annihilate* them, of course!" Trenderhoof said as he pushed his opponent's sword away. "Until then, they come in handy!"

The door was burst open by five mares, including Sugarcoat, Lemon Zest, Sour Sweet, the peach mare that had been dueling with Rainbow and another unicorn. Sugarcoat shot at Discord before he could turn around, scorching his bat wing.

"Gah!" he cried out.

Trenderhoof swung his beam and managed to slash him across the snout. The five mares pounced on the draconequus, grabbing his four appendages and his head, forcing him to drop his sword and shield.

"What did I tell you?" Trenderhoof smirked as he watched his foe descend. "Having so many mares at your beck and call comes in handy."

A few minutes earlier, the five mares rushing to their master's aid were prevented by the ongoing duel between Sunset and Twilight.

"Ya need some help there, Shimmer?" the peach mare called.

"No!" Sunset said as she deflected Twilight's spell.

Sugarcoat stared at her blankly. "It looks like you need help."

"I *don't* ! Just go!"

The five mares ducked beneath the fight, but a blue unicorn with short purple hair paused a moment.

"I can just zap her quickly and…"

"I DON'T NEED HELP, SUNNY FLARE!"

The two foes fired at once, their beams hitting and knocking each other backwards. Twilight hurdled into the East Hall while Sunset crashed into the pillar that the staircase curled around.

"You sure you don't need…?"

Sunset growled at the peach mare.

"Come on, Indigo Zap!" Sunny Flare said, dragging her upstairs.

After brushing the stone rubble off, Sunset dashed to where her opponent had landed: inside the weapons closet. Fortunately, Twilight hadn't suffered any fatal injuries, but a wooden stake had pierced her right wing. She let out a grunt as she tugged it out.

"Weapons?" Sunset said, levitating a mace. "How deliciously convenient."

She brought the mace down on Twilight, who dived through Sunset's legs and spun onto her hooves. As Sunset turned around, Twilight shot at the mace, exploding its spiked head.

"You're right," Sunset said, tossing the useless metal rod away. "That would be too easy."

She flapped her wings and tried to take advantage from above, but Twilight thought quickly and cast a sunbeam, burning a hole in her foe's right wing. Sunset cried out as she fell to the floor.

"There!" Twilight said, ignoring the inexplicable ringing in her ears. "That evens the odds, don't you think?"

The yellow unicorn gawked up at her. "Was that…a *sunbeam* ?!"

"Mmm-hmm!" Twilight answered, crouching as she watched her rise.

"But…the last pony to master that was…"

"Mage Meadowbrook? I know."

Sunset's eyes widened in awe. "How in the world did you…?"

"I read a lot."

Sunset swiftly jumped to the side as Twilight shot another sunbeam.

"Impressive," Sunset smirked as her foe powered her horn. "But the sunbeam can easily be counteracted by…"

As the spell came, a spiked blue dome appeared around Sunset, turning both itself and the ray into steam upon impact. Twilight's jaw dropped.

"An ice shield?"

"And what better way to fight fire," Sunset chuckled as a fireball formed above her head, "than with *fire* ?!"

Twilight leaped backward as the fireball crashed into the floor. She summoned a stream of water to douse it.

Still in shock, she said, "These spells were invented by Starswirl the Bearded."

"He was my mentor."

"But if you were…" She looked at her in horror. "He was murdered ten years ago by…"

"His student?" Sunset gestured proudly to herself. "Guilty as charged. It was a real pity. He was like a father to me."

"Then why did you…?"

"He wanted to cure me of my vampirism." She scoffed as she prepared another fireball. "Like I was going to give up this much power."

Twilight was ready this time and produced an ice shield similar to

Sunset's. The yellow mare gasped as their spells evaporated into steam.

"You…you copied my spell!"

Twilight blew upwards at her smoking horn. "Wasn't that hard."

Her adversary blinked. "It took me years to perfect that spell!"

"I guess," Twilight said, firing a smaller ray at her, "I'm just," Sunset stopped it with her own beam, "smarter," flashing a bubble, Twilight sent the other unicorn backward, "than you!"

Sunset panted heavily as she struggled to rise. "I suppose…you are."

She cocked her head at her. "Then why are you smiling?"

The yellow mare lifted her head. "This is the most fun I've had in," she pounced, " *decades* !"

Even with seven foes upstairs and four already dead, Applejack, Rarity, Pinkie and Rainbow were still outnumbered by eight vampires plus Bulk. Pinkie had run out of ammunition and one of the unicorns had blasted her axe away.

"There's too many of 'em!" Applejack shouted. "We need help!"

A knock came at the front door.

"I'll get it!" Pinkie hollered as she dashed down the hall. She came back a few seconds later and asked, "Hey, Dash! Did you order some backup?"

"Huh?" Rainbow said as Bulk pinned her down again. "What are you talking about?"

"There are four vampires at the door saying they've come from Zebrica and that one of them's Discord's old master…"

Rainbow smiled as she rolled the pricolici onto his back. "Yes! Pinkie, let them in!"

Pinkie called to the front door, "You can all come in, guys!"

The enemy army was caught by surprise as Sombra, Hope, a white unicorn mare with a curly pink and purple mane and a brown male vampire with reddish brown hair sprang into the entrance hall. The black unicorn collided into Applejack.

"No, Sombra, wait!" Rainbow shouted as Bulk bolted back up. "She's on our side!"

"Oops," Sombra said, crawling off the mare. "Apologies. Who *is* on our side?"

"The pink one and the white unicorn!" Rainbow yelped as the pricolici threw his hairy arms around her. "You can kill the rest!"

"With pleasure!" the brown stallion said, punching an incoming vampire mare.

Hope and Sombra powered their horns and began firing. The young white unicorn saw that Rarity was encircled by four mares, so she landed next to her and blasted one of them away.

"Sweetie Belle?"

The young unicorn turned to her and gasped. "Rarity?"

"You're a vampire?!" they said together.

"Look out!"

Rarity ducked in time for Sweetie Belle to shoot another enemy.

"What are you doing here?" Rarity demanded as they took on the quartet together.

"After you disappeared with Tenderheart," Sweetie Belle said between blasts, "I went looking for you and—to your left! Sombra and Hope found me and—duck! When I grew up they—above you!

Turned me! Had I known you were a vampire too…"

"Tenderheart's a vampire!" Rarity said as she flipped over her sister to fire at the next wave of attackers. "This is actually—take that! *His* army! He left me to—give me your forelegs!" They linked forelegs and Rarity lifted her sister onto her back and spun her around while Sweetie Belle stuck out her back hooves, kicking their foes' faces. "Die! But Discord found me!"

Seeing that they were safe for the moment, Rarity set her down and turned to her. "I would've told you, but how could I? I didn't want to put you in danger. And to think, I thought you dead this whole time!"

"I thought *you* dead this whole time! When Sombra told me his old adopted son had a coven, he didn't mention you were in it!"

Rarity darted her eyes across the room. "Rainbow! Did you know about this?!"

"We wanted to surprise you! Oomph!"

Bulk punched her hard in the stomach and sent her crashing through the door to the kitchen.

Meanwhile, the brown stallion landed between Sweetie Belle and Rarity.

"Hey, honey!" he said to the former. "Watch this!"

Letting out a battle cry, he charged towards a group of vampires, knocking them over like ninepins.

"Who's that?" Rarity asked.

"That's Button Mash. He's my," Sweetie Belle said, biting her lip, "my mate."

The older sister's eyes widened. "You have a *mate* ?!"

"Can we talk about this later?" she asked, pointing to the vampires closing in on them.

Meanwhile, Bulk tore off what was left of the kitchen door and advanced on Rainbow Dash, who had landed in a pile of pots and pans. The pricolici was enormous. She couldn't defeat him with strength alone. Searching frantically for ideas, she began opening the cabinets and drawers until she found the one containing the silverware.

"Aha!"

Her happiness was short-lived when Bulk's body thrust into hers, trapping her beneath him. The impact had shaken the drawer, knocking one piece of silverware onto the floor. Grinning, Rainbow snatched it up and pointed it at the pricolici. He recoiled in fear.

"That's right!" she exclaimed, rising to her hooves. "This spoon is *silver* , buddy!"

As she brought the spoon closer, the pricolici backed away, whimpering like a puppy.

"Not so tough now are ya, huh? All because of a little spoon?"

He crawled into a corner, shivering as the horrid spoon approached his chest.

"STOP!" he wailed as he reverted to his pony form. "Please!"

Rainbow stepped back in surprise as blood tears poured out of his eyes.

"Please, please! I never wanted to hurt any pony! I didn't even want to be a werewolf! I was bitten as a foal!" He covered his face in shame. "Trenderhoof said he could help me control myself! I didn't know that meant making me a pricolici! And he still makes me hurt ponies! And he and his mares are so mean!"

She cocked her head curiously at him. "If you don't like doing it, why do you listen to him?"

He sniffed. "I just wanted friends!"

Rainbow felt extremely awkward. In a matter of seconds, the

dreaded pricolici had become a giant weeping baby. She couldn't beat him up now.

"I'll do anything, please! Just get that accursed spoon away from me!"

Cautiously, she lowered the spoon. "Okay. I won't hurt you, if you join us in this battle."

Wiping his tears, he looked up at her hopefully. "And…we can be friends?"

"Uh…yeah. Sure."

He leaped happily onto his hooves. "YEAH!"

After changing back into his wolf form, he roared as he charged back into the foyer, tackling a vampire who was on top of Pinkie. Rarity and Applejack watched the scene in confusion.

"It's okay!" Rainbow assured them. "He's with us now!"

"He's a friend?" Pinkie asked excitedly.

"YEAH!" the pricolici snarled as he tore his victim's head off with his teeth.

"Well," Rarity said, blinking. "As long as he's helping."

Meanwhile, in Discord's chamber, the draconequus was fighting off Trenderhoof's five mares. The two unicorns pinned his appendages to the wall with magical cuffs.

"You should've collected more mares," Trenderhoof said smugly as he went over to the coffin. "Soon you will have none." His magic encased the lid. "Kill him."

Indigo Zap and Lemon Zest flew up and gripped their hooves onto Discord's head. But as soon as the casket was open, a hissing creature leaped out at Trenderhoof. The mares' heads turned to see

their master under a yellow vampire mare in a wedding dress. Discord's jaw dropped.

"Fluttershy," he said in wonder. "You're," he broke through the cuffs and magically threw the mares off him, his eyes not leaving his bride, " *gorgeous* !"

Her fur was pale, her eyes were redder than blood, her ears were pointier and fluffier, her wings had grown into those of a bat and her long flowing mane was wild and tangled. She snarled down at Trenderhoof, whose eyes were wide in terror.

He tried knocking her back with his magic, but she was persistent and charged at him again. Sour Sweet and Lemon Zest jumped at her, but with a swish of her wings they went hurtling backward. Sugarcoat and Sunny Flare began firing, but she was quick and swooped down, hissing at them.

Discord watched in awe as his beloved unleashed hell upon the vampires. She had one thought on her mind: blood. Whether it was mortal blood, she didn't seem to care, for she was gnashing her fangs at her foes, biting into their skin whenever she had the opportunity. For the moment, the sweet mare was gone and the demon inside had taken over.

Master! Aria called to Trenderhoof telepathically. *Bulk has turned traitor and taken out one of our own! And four more vampires have joined the fight!*

Forget them! We need help up here! Count Discord's a draconequus and Lady Fluttershy has awoken!

There was a pause.

You mean to tell me the six of you can't handle one draconequus and one newborn vampire?

He scowled. *Just get up here!*

As Aria raced down the hall, she paused as she caught a whiff of

something. She turned to Spike's bedroom door, pressed herself against it and sniffed. Her eyes rolled back blissfully as she exhaled.

"Dragon blood."

She remembered the small dragon who had answered the door earlier. Dragon blood was rumored to have magical properties, and drinking it would make the vampire even more powerful. With Adagio gone, and Sunset's loyalty withering, there was a chance Aria would be made Trenderhoof chief mistress. If this dragon's blood could make her even more powerful, she would be sure to win that position.

She stepped back and charged at the door. On the other side, Spike, Scootaloo and Angel shivered under the bed as they watched the door bang over and over.

"What are we going to do?" Scootaloo whispered.

"Quiet!" Spike hissed as he reached his claw up under the mattress. "I've got an idea."

Okay. Three parts.

The Sunset vs. Twilight bits were inspired by two movie duels: Inigo vs. Wesley in *The Princess Bride* and the "Straight On" scene in *Strange Magic.* Discord vs. Trenderhoof was a mix of Gaston vs. The Beast and "The Confrontation" in *Les Miz.*

Resolution

Twilight didn't know how much longer she could keep this up. An injured wing wasn't enough to slow down Sunset. In fact, she seemed to be getting more and more energized with every attack and parry. Twilight had never been much of a fighter. Her only duels had been with her fellow vampires, not including her recent encounter with the Dazzlings. But she could tell this unicorn had done this sort of thing before and took pleasure in it.

Indeed, her magic was impressive. First the ice shield, then the fireball, now she was casting the classic lightning bolt, complete with thundercloud. Under normal circumstances, Twilight would be swapping notes with her, but she didn't have time to get swept up in Sunset's talent. Right now, she needed to focus on surviving it.

Sunset was enjoying herself too much. Never had she met an opponent this close to her level. The knowledge Twilight exhibited was incredible. She had duplicated her spell after seeing it once. The fight was becoming so engaging that Sunset started casting less lethal spells to make it last longer. Truly, she didn't want this adrenaline rush to end.

"By the way," she said as she dodged a ray. "I really should thank you for killing Adagio." She shot a beam, which Twilight avoided. "She was *really* getting on my nerves, always trying to squeeze her way between me and my Trend."

Twilight narrowed her gaze as they circled each other. "You're delusional if you think that *pig* is your mate."

"You're just jealous," Sunset retorted, firing.

"Why," Twilight said, dashing to the side, "would I be jealous," she shot at her, "of being," Sunset ducked, "some pony's," they pounced at each other and clashed horns, "puppet?"

"So this is your game, huh?" Sunset said, swishing her head upwards to push her off. "Messing with my head to drive a wedge

between me and him? I knew it was you all along."

"What are you talking about?"

"Oh, please!" She powered her horn. "Don't pretend it wasn't you who," a fireball formed over her head, "cast that spell." She brought it down hard, but Twilight quickly thought up an ice shield. "Tried to make me think of you," she shot a simpler beam, "while we were," another one, " *bucking* !"

Twilight stopped the first shot with a beam of her own, but upon hearing the end of Sunset's sentence, she stiffened and the second ray hit the top of her head, scorching her bangs.

"If he was your mate," she grunted as she spouted water drops from her horn to douse the smoke, "then you would've dreamt of him!"

"Ugh!" Sunset groaned, throwing her head back. "What is with you and dreams?!"

"You would know! You've been making me dream of you for the past few nights!"

She cocked her head. "What?"

"Well it didn't work! I would *never* do something so revolting!"

Twilight surprised Sunset by jumping at her, tackling her into a tumble. Sunset ended up on the bottom.

"I have no idea what you're talking about." She flashed a bubble to cast her off. "But for the last time, vampires don't have dreams!"

Dodging her next spell, Twilight said, "Don't you know anything about vampire mating rituals?" Sunset began launching a string of magical beams. "Every vampire," Twilight dipped down and slid past her, "is destined for," she rose to her hooves, "one true soulmate."

She maneuvered the next wave by somersaulting backward. "And once," she said between flips, "that vampire…knows his…mate… he…remains…loyal," she landed back on her hooves, "to her!"

"Trenderhoof *is* loyal to me!" her foe insisted.

"Then why were you jealous of Adagio?"

She scoffed. "I wasn't jealous!" Another fireball was forming. "She was just a *slut* !"

Twilight dipped out of the way just in time.

"It's not *my* fault she took away *your* precious stallion!"

She narrowed her eyes. "What gives you the right to criticize my love life, when you don't even know what love is?!"

"That's it!" Sunset cried, bearing her teeth as she tackled her. "No more Ms. Nice Mare!"

As they rolled around on the floor, Trenderhoof's voice erupted in the yellow mare's head.

Sunset! Are you still wasting your time with that pathetic unicorn?!

You wouldn't call her pathetic if you saw her fight!

You're needed up here! We can't hold back Discord or his crazy newborn mate!

I'll come as soon as I'm finished!

Then finish her! Now!

A nagging pinch in her head urged her to obey.

"Fine!" Pinning her adversary down, Sunset said, "Sorry to cut our battle short, but…"

She fired at her horn and Twilight felt it go numb. Wincing, she realized her magic was frozen again.

"I bet you're wondering how I'm able to do that," Sunset said smugly. "It's quite simple, really. Just take a stunning spell and aim it right at the tip of the horn, freezing its magic instantly."

Twilight struggled to rise, but her foe's hooves had dug deep into her forelegs and she was sitting firmly on her haunches.

"As fun as this has been," said Sunset, "I have to kill you now. Nothing personal. You truly were a worthy opponent. Now," she drew closer as she scrutinized her, "what would be the best way to dispose of you?"

Twilight had to think fast. She couldn't rely on Sunset's pondering to last the entire time her magic was incapacitated. She was beginning to see what Rainbow Dash had been trying to teach her. If she depended only on her magic, she would be helpless in a situation like this. She had to use her other strengths. But how?

Then she looked at where Sunset was sitting and remembered Rainbow trapping her in a similar position. She was on her hips, not her chest. She didn't have high mount.

"Ah!" Sunset finally said. "I know!"

The second her horn ignited, Twilight took action. She forcefully bucked her hips into the air, making Sunset cry out as she fell forward. She caught herself by placing her hooves on either side of Twilight's head, but before she could get back into position, Twilight clasped her hooves around Sunset's right elbow and jabbed it into her opponent's stomach. Then Twilight hooked her left back hoof over Sunset's right back leg, lifted her hips to the left and flipped her over. Firmly planting her hooves on Sunset's shoulders, Twilight made sure she was sitting on her chest so she couldn't try the same thing.

"A worthy opponent, you say?"

Sunset's surprised expression turned into a scowl as she powered her horn again. But as Twilight felt her magical strength return, she shot a beam at the tip of her foe's horn and the magic extinguished.

"Wha…how did…?" Sunset stammered.

"Stunning spell," Twilight said. "Thanks for the," she tapped her horn, "tip."

It was as if she had stunned more than just her magic, for as Sunset stared up at the lavender unicorn, she found she couldn't move, speak, or breathe. Not that that last function was important anyway, but everything else in her body had shut down.

She had been beaten, physically and intellectually. At last, she had met her match.

If she was to die now, at least she had the honor of being vanquished by such a brilliant foe.

As she ignited her horn, Twilight was prepared to finish this vampire off, but then something made her pause. Even though she wasn't changing into her pony form, Sunset's irises had become green, and her pupils dilated as they focused on her. One look in those eyes and Twilight's magic was doused.

So many things happened at once. Even though a single second had passed in real time, in Twilight's mind it was like several hours as she attempted to analyze the situation. Her cold blood was rushing through her veins, her heart was swelling with warmth, and beneath her hooves she could feel a spark, but she did not pull away.

It was difficult to explain why this was happening and why now. She had never thought this could happen to her, much less like this. But it explained everything else. Why she'd been dreaming, why she'd been feeling so strange around this mare, why her locator spell hadn't worked. They hadn't been curses, but omens.

There were still so many questions, but Twilight didn't feel like it was necessary to ask them. As her dreams had said, as Zecora had said, the answer to everything had been right under her nose. Quite literally at the moment. The lingering questions didn't matter, for one thing was crystal clear.

"You're not his mate."

Sunset grimaced and blasted her off her chest. The minute the ray hit her, Sunset wailed and clutched her head as a sudden searing pain ran through it. Twilight landed on her back. As she staggered to

her hooves, she slowly changed into her pony form.

"I don't want to fight you, Sunset."

Sunset grunted as she rose. "Coward."

She shook her head, saying, "No," and took a careful step forward. "I'm not fighting you." She stepped closer. "I'm confronting you."

The yellow unicorn narrowed her eyes as she started forming a fireball. "You're just afraid I'm going to—ARGH!"

The fireball extinguished as she cradled her head again. She looked up accusingly at Twilight.

"What did you do to me?!"

"I did nothing." Unafraid, Twilight kept advancing. "It was Fate."

She blinked. "What?"

"Sunset, listen to me. Trenderhoof has lied to you."

Sunset growled as she prepared another spell. "Not *this* again!"

"Think about it, Sunset. When you look at him, does the world fall away? When you hold him, is it like you're holding the most precious thing in the world?" Sunset's horn grew brighter. "Does it bother you when you're with another?"

Her magic faded and she stared blankly at the lavender unicorn.

"And when he's with another," Twilight continued, now standing a few hooves away from her, "does it bother *him* ? Do you follow him because you love him, or because he gives you no choice? Sunset," her face turned serious, "did he even *ask* if you wanted to be a vampire?"

Sunset's eyes were moistening, but she tried not to show her vulnerability. With a furious grunt, she used her magic to thrust Twilight against the wall. Another migraine made her cry out.

"I don't want to hurt you, Sunset," Twilight choked as tears streaked down her cheeks. "You don't want to hurt me either. You don't have to. He has no power over you anymore. Can't you feel it? You're free."

Staring at her, Sunset spoke in a strained voice, "Why…why do I not want to hurt you?"

Twilight smiled. "Because we're destined for each other, Sunset. We don't need to question anything anymore. Not about life, not about the future, not about…what's in our hearts. Everything we could ever want, everything we could ever need, is right here."

Sunset didn't look like she believed her.

"Please, Sunset," she said, whimpering slightly. "I know you believe me. I know you feel it too. Please. Believe me."

She did not reply.

"Very well. Kill me if you must," Twilight said, closing her eyes, "but at least I'll die knowing it was possible to…to love again."

Sunset's eyes widened as she continued to stare at the mare who was accepting her fate. But she wasn't just talking about death. Her words were insane, but from her lips, they almost sounded true. But no, they couldn't be true. Grinding her teeth together, Sunset telepathically called out to Trenderhoof, begging him to tell her the mare was crazy and that he was the only love for her.

But no response ever came.

Aria's shoulder was getting sore, so she drew back to massage it. The door was thick, possibly by magic. Discord's coven certainly didn't want her getting in there. Then she glanced at the walls holding the doorframe.

"Hey, wait a minute!"

She flapped her wings and charged at the wall. Her back hooves

smashed right through it. She scoffed as she flew through the hole.

"You should've thickened the walls too."

She was surprised to find the room empty, but figured the dragon was hiding.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

Taking a whiff of the air, she turned to the bed. Smirking, she returned to the floor and crouched down low as she approached the bed. She chuckled throatily as she lifted the covers and peered underneath.

A high-pitched screech stung her ears as a rabbit jumped out and grabbed her face. Aria wailed in agony as her face burned, for his paws were covered in garlic powder. Angel showed no mercy as he clawed at her eyes. Standing up, Aria ripped him from her face and scowled at him.

"You little rat! I'm gonna swallow you wh—"

She gasped as she was stabbed in the back. As she exploded into dust, Scootaloo gawked at the wooden stake in her hoof.

"Wow," she uttered. "That was so cool!"

"Great job!"

Spike emerged from under the bed. He and Scootaloo were armed with wooden stakes and garlic necklaces.

"Now let's go help the girls!" he said, holding up his weapons.

"Yeah!" Scootaloo cried. "Death to our enemies!"

The three of them shouted as they rushed out of the room and down the hall to where the battle was. But Angel paused a moment as his ear twitched. He turned to the spiral staircase and hopped towards it.

In the foyer, the enemy army was down by three more. Sombra had

vanquished one, Rainbow had ripped the head off another and Bulk was toying with the remains of his latest victim, who was begging him to put her out of her misery.

"Evil vampires perish!" Scootaloo yelled as she and Spike raced down the stairs.

"We are the night!" Spike cried. "And we won't let you take it from us!"

"Spike!" Applejack wailed. "What are ya doin' here?!"

Instead of listening to her, he said, "Watch out!"

He threw a stake over her head, striking the vampire about to pounce on her. Unfortunately, he missed the heart, but it distracted her long enough for Applejack to see and attack her.

"Get out of here!" she shouted at the dragon as she wrestled her opponent.

"No, I'm helping!" Spike said, raising another stake.

"Spike, if ya don't get out of here now, I'll…"

Her adversary flipped her over and hissed. She squeaked suddenly as Spike plunged a second stake into her, this time dissolving her into dust. Applejack looked up at him in amazement.

"You were saying?"

Sunset? Sunset! Sunset, where are you?!

Trenderhoof's telepathic messages were useless as he writhed beneath the bloodthirsty vampire who had him pinned to the ground. He continuously summoned bubbles to knock her over, but she kept coming back like a rabid dog.

On the other side of the room, Trenderhoof's five mistresses were fending off Discord, who had upped his game. Lifting his paw and

claw upward, he brought forth a wall of fire between him and the mares. They shrieked as the flames scorched them while Sugarcoat and Sunny Flare attempted to extinguish the fire with their magic. Unfortunately, Discord hadn't counted on the fire spreading and hopped up and down when his dragon foot caught it. With a snap of his fingers, he made water dump from the ceiling.

"Okay, I might have overdone it there."

"Lemon Zap!" Trenderhoof called as he shot an unsuccessful beam at the Flutterbat. "Indigo Zest! Help me!"

The two mares grunted. "Lemon *Zest* and Indigo *Zap* !"

"Whatever! Just get this thing off me!"

As the two of them went to help their master, Discord looked curiously at the other three. "That idiot can't even remember your names. Why do you follow him?"

"There are a lot of us to remember," Sunny Flare said, flying up to blast at him. "We don't hold it against him."

Discord caught the beam in his paw and rolled it up into a ball. "He definitely needs a lot of you," he said as he teasingly bounced the ball in his paw, "considering he can't fight his own battles."

He pitched it back to the mares.

"He's a pathetic fighter," Sugarcoat said as she created a cricket bat out of her magic. "He knows we're better than him."

She swung at the sphere, hitting it into the wall on her right.

"Don't think I didn't hear that, Sugarcoat!" Trenderhoof called as he watched Lemon Zest and Indigo Zap wrestle with Flutterbat.

"Better than him, hmm?" Discord said, stroking his beard. "If you lot are all so special," he snapped his fingers and a pink cloud formed over the mares' heads, "how come he didn't take you to Bullarest with him?"

The mares scattered as wooden stakes rained down on them. One struck Flutterbat's tail and she hissed annoyingly at Discord.

"Whoops," he said, snapping the storm away. "Sorry, darling."

"We don't mind if he can't fit all twenty of us in his carriage," Sour Sweet said before scowling. " *Even if he always brings the Dazzlings and that* Slut *set Shimmer!* "

Discord raised an eyebrow. "Now that hardly seems fair, don't you think? Putting those four before you."

"You know they have stronger abilities!" Trenderhoof insisted.

"True," Sunny Flare said as she powered her horn. "That doesn't mean we're useless."

The three closed in on Discord, but were prevented by gold light enveloping them. They yelped as he suspended them in midair.

"Let me guess," he said, scrutinizing them. "He seduced each and every one of you, changed you into vampires, made you his mistresses and now you have no choice but to do his bidding, and yet you've accepted this as your fate."

"We're not exactly monogamists," Sugarcoat harrumphed.

"You see?" Trenderhoof taunted. "They're *happy* like this! Aren't you, girls?"

Indigo Zap panted as she trapped Flutterbat into a headlock. "Being a vampire *does* have its perks."

She shrieked as Flutterbat chomped on her hoof.

"But does he even care about any of you?" Discord asked as he spun his three captives around. "When's the last time he showed his appreciation for your hard work? When's the last time he did something for *you* ?"

They did not respond, only glared at him. So he tried another tactic.

"When's the last time he made love to any of you?"

Lemon Zest and Indigo Zap froze, the latter holding Flutterbat and the former with her hoof raised to strike her. The trapped mares stared at him with wide eyes and then glanced at each other.

"I see," Discord said, almost in pity. "So many mares, he doesn't have time for all of you, does he?"

The mares looked to Sugarcoat. "He has a point."

Indigo Zap tossed Flutterbat aside and she and Lemon Zest advanced upon their master. Discord released the others so they could do the same. Trenderhoof watched in terror as his mistresses closed in on him.

"Now, now, girls!" he said, holding up his hooves. "Before you do something you'll regret, hear me out…"

"Oh sure, we'll hear you out," Sour Sweet chimed. Then she narrowed her gaze. " *But you won't change our minds!* "

"Stop this! Do you forget who has the power over you? Do you forget what will happen if you do this? Do you want to lose your souls?"

They stopped to ponder

"He also has a point," Lemon Zest said.

"Yeah," said Sugarcoat with a shrug. "But it's not like we were using our souls for much anyway."

"Another good point."

They drew closer to him, driving him into a corner. Seeing that he was outnumbered, Trenderhoof winced and concentrated. The five mares screamed and clutched their heads.

"I forgot he could do that!" Indigo Zap shouted.

He pushed past them, but was met with Flutterbat charging towards

him. He flashed a bubble, this one sending her into the wall.

"Fluttershy!" Discord cried, rushing to her side.

Trenderhoof took the opportunity to escape, but as soon as he opened the door, Angel leapt out at him and scratched at his face.

"Gah!" he cried out as the garlic powder burned his skin. "You rotten rodent!" He used his magic to pry him off. "I'll show you!"

He threw the rabbit over his shoulder. Angel squealed as he soared across the room and was silent as he hit the stone wall. The small sound of bones breaking was heard and Flutterbat's attention snapped to the bunny that was sliding to the floor. For one second, her eyes reverted to their original teal.

"Angel?"

The mares were still cradling their heads as Trenderhoof dashed down the staircase. Angel was lying in a small pool of blood, his eyes closed and his head lolled to the side.

"Angel!"

Fluttershy flew to her bunny and carefully lifted him into her hooves. He was breathing, but he was so limp and still.

Discord was surprised to see that she had regained her senses so quickly, but he didn't think too much on it when he saw how distressed she was.

Laying a paw on her shoulder he said, "Fluttershy?"

She darted her red eyes at him and growled through her teeth, "Kill him! Kill that monster!"

Determined, Discord launched himself after the fiend.

Trenderhoof glanced nervously over his shoulder as he flapped down the hall. In doing so, he bumped into Sunset Shimmer, who was blocking the exit.

"Sunset!" he said, sighing in relief. "There you are! We must retreat! Count Discord is a draconequus, five of the girls *and* Bulk have turned traitor, and Lady Fluttershy has gone crazy!"

"Well," Sunset said, scowling at him. "I tried to tell you this battle wouldn't end well for you."

Twilight stepped out from behind her, making Trenderhoof blink back in confusion.

"Why haven't you killed her yet?"

"I don't want to," Sunset said firmly.

"What do you mean you don't *want* to? I ordered you to…"

"Is it true?" She took a threatening step forward. "Am I not really your mate?"

He scoffed. "Where did this come from? Of course you're my…"

"You say that, but it's all a lie, isn't it?"

Trenderhoof tried to gain control over her again with his mind, but his confidence drained from his face when it didn't work. He then glanced at the lavender unicorn standing dutifully beside Sunset.

"Oh no," he said, backing away. "You can't possible mean…"

"So it *is* true!" Sunset barked. "All these years, you were just *using* me! And for what?! My magic? My *body* ?!"

"Sunset, listen to me…"

"No! I don't *have* to listen to you anymore!" She grunted. "I can't believe it! I sacrificed *everything* for you! And you," her horn powered up, "gave me," a fireball started to form, " *nothing* !"

Squealing, Trenderhoof turned and ran, but stopped when he saw Discord.

"My sweet Fluttershy wants you dead," he said, advancing while his

paw and claw created golden spheres.

Trenderhoof glanced between the three beings closing in on him. When they were but less than a meter away, he flashed a shield. Once they were knocked backwards, he maneuvered around them. However, when he got to the steps, a zap from Rarity's horn damaged his left wing, bringing him to the floor. She was part of another blockade consisting of Bulk, Applejack and Spike. Glancing below, Trenderhoof saw that most of his army had perished, all except Sonata, whom Pinkie was holding with an axe to her throat. Some new vampires he had never seen before were coming up the steps to join their comrades.

"It's over, Trenderhoof," Discord said as he, Twilight and Sunset came closer. "You're out of allies and options. Surrender now," Rarity, Sombra, Hope and Sweetie Belle illuminated their horns, "or we all fire at once."

Trenderhoof searched frantically for an escape route. The hall behind him was empty, but he was outnumbered and would be caught in an instant. Then he spotted the being on the steps closest to him: the dragon. Smiling evilly, he swiftly used his magic to grab him and pull him to his chest. The sudden jerk made Spike drop his stake.

"Spike!" Applejack cried.

Before she could pounce, Trenderhoof shouted, "One false move," he turned his head away as he magically tore off Spike's garlic necklace, "and I snap this dragon's neck!"

Sunset stepped forward but Twilight stopped her with her foreleg.

"That includes magic!" the fiend ordered. "Extinguish your horns, paws, claws, any other magical body parts!" He tilted the dragon's head so his neck was exposed near Trenderhoof's fangs. "Now!"

All the magic users reluctantly obeyed them when they saw the fear in Spike's eyes. Trenderhoof still held him as he slowly backed away into the hall and glanced around at the doors. "Ugh! Where are the windows on this floor?!"

Twilight looked over at Applejack and saw that her eyes were reddening by the second.

"No," she heaved. "You're not takin' him away from me!"

"Applejack, don't!" Twilight cried.

But the passionate mare couldn't hold herself back. Before Trenderhoof noticed her, she sprung at him, hissing furiously. He yelped as she tackled him, forcing him to drop Spike, but Trenderhoof was quick and cast her off with another shield.

"So," he said as he levitated Spike again, making Applejack gasp. "This dragon means something to you, eh? It would be a real pain for you to watch him die."

Spike screamed as he was sent hurtling through the door to the music room. A discordant bang was heard as he collided into the piano.

"Spike!" Applejack shouted, leaping through the hole.

As Trenderhoof chased after her, he noticed the others rushing to their aid their friends. Once he was in the room, he summoned a force field to prevent them from entering. Bulk smashed through the wall, but Trenderhoof had barricaded that too.

"This is between me and the mare!" he said, turning away from them.

"Come on, unicorns!" Discord said, his paws glowing. "Let's see if we can poke a hole in it!"

Inside, Applejack was kneeling by the piano with Spike, supporting his head. His breath was steady, but he was struggling to open his eyes.

"Spike, get up!" she said, her voice cracking. "Stay with me, please! Spike, can ya hear…?"

Trenderhoof's magic pulled her away.

"No!" she cried, reaching her hooves out to the dragon. "No, please! Don't hurt him!"

She shrieked as his magic forced her onto her back. He cackled as he crawled onto her.

"I'm not interested in the dragon, AJ," he said, leaning in towards her. "It's you I'm after. Of all the mares I took, you were the one who resisted me the most. Do you have any idea how much that hurt my pride? Now," his magic ripped the front of her dress, "what say we finish what we started?"

Spike ignored the throbbing in his head as he rose into a sitting position. When he opened his eyes, he saw Trenderhoof sitting on top of Applejack. His magic had her completely paralyzed and her face was filled with terror. Then Spike saw her exposed chest. It was covered in scars much like the one on her foreleg.

It was then that he understood what Trenderhoof had done to her twenty years ago. He hadn't just changed her into a vampire. Had he done that to Rarity too?

Spike's blood boiled in hatred for the stallion. He couldn't let him touch Applejack. Not again, not while his heart was still beating.

Trenderhoof's mouth was advancing on her chest. Spike had to act quickly.

He held out his right arm and bared his left claw. With a passionate cry, he dug his sharp claw deep into his thick skin, wincing as he dragged it up his arm.

"Hey, dingbat!"

Trenderhoof's head snapped around and his eyes widened at the fresh gash in Spike's arm.

"You want blood?" the dragon said, waving his wound. "Take mine! Just leave her alone!"

"Spike, what are ya doin'?!" Applejack shouted as she attempted to turn her head.

The stallion's mouth watered as he watched the deep scarlet blood drip from the dragon's small but succulent arm.

"Yes," he breathed, inhaling the sweet scent. "Dragon…blood."

It was too much for him to resist. Besides, it would give him pleasure seeing Applejack's agony as she watched her precious dragon be drained right in front of her.

He charged hungrily at Spike, his mouth open and ready. His fangs were just a centimeter away when he felt a sudden sting in his chest. Choking, he glanced down to see a wooden stake sticking out of the dragon's sleeve, the point jabbed into the vampire's heart. He looked back up at Spike, whose reptilian eyes were narrowed in fury.

"You're never hurting *any* of my friends again."

Those eyes were the last thing Trenderhoof saw before he evaporated into dust.

Alright, how many of you saw THAT coming?

Aftermath

WARNING: TRAGIC AND HEATED MOMENTS AHEAD!

The song "At Last" from "Dracula" the musical was a huge inspiration for this chapter.

The minute he was dust, Trenderhoof's enchantments fell away. The cavalry burst into the room, ready to fight but stopped when they saw Spike bleeding on the floor. The tempting smell urged them to stay behind the threshold.

"What happened?" Twilight demanded, putting her hoof to her snout.

"Where's Trenderhoof?" Rarity asked, glancing around.

Applejack ignored their questions as she rushed to the dragon.

"Spike! Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." He smiled weakly up at her. "He can't hurt you anymore, AJ."

"He's dead?" Sunset said, seeing the spectacles atop a pile of dust.

"Spike killed him," Applejack said, tearing off a piece of her skirt.

" *Spike* ?!" Rarity gasped. " *Spike* killed Trenderhoof?!"

"Yeah," the dragon heaved as Applejack bandaged his arm.

"Why, Spike?" she said, shaking her head. "Why would ya go and do a crazy thing like that?"

"I'm the dragon knight, aren't I? When my true love is in trouble, I've got to save her, right?"

She looked up at him. "W-What?"

He laid his claw over her hoof, which was still on his wounded arm. "I know."

Many ponies scratched their heads as the two of them stared at each other.

"What's up with them?" Rainbow asked.

Twilight grinned. "They've finally found each other."

Rarity looked at her. "Wait. You don't mean…?"

"Where is he?!" Sonata pushed through the crowd. "Where's my Trendy?! What have you done with him?!"

"Pinkie, you were supposed to hold her!" Rainbow hollered.

"But she bit me!" Pinkie whined as she caught up, cradling her foreleg.

Sonata searched the room. "Where is he?! Which one of you killed him?!"

"It doesn't matter, Sonata," Sunset said bluntly. "He's gone now. We're free."

The siren stared at her in shock. "How…how can you say that?! You loved him!"

"I thought I did, but it was a lie. He never loved anyone."

Without any pony noticing, Twilight took her hoof.

"He loved *me* !" Sonata cried, tears forming in her eyes. "He loved *all* of us! He was our everything!"

Three of the other mistresses appeared in the wall's hole.

"Is it true?" Indigo Zap asked. "Is he dead?"

"We felt his presence leave us!" said Lemon Zest.

"Yup," Sugarcoat said, seeing the dust and glasses. "He's dead."

"They killed him!" Sonata shouted, coming up to her comrades. "We must punish them!"

"You kidding?" Indigo Zap huffed. "We're *relieved* !"

"He never cared for us," said Sugarcoat. "He was a pig."

She gazed at them all in disbelief. "You…you'll pay for your ingratitude! Aria! Aria?" She glanced around. "Where's my sister?!"

"Was she the purple one?" Scootaloo whispered to Rainbow.

Sonata growled and pounced on the foal. "What did you do to my sister?!"

"I…" Scootaloo whimpered. "I, uh…stabbed her?"

The siren wailed. "YOU KILLED ARIA TOO?!"

Rainbow kicked Sonata's back legs, forcing her to release Scootaloo.

"Sonata, calm down," Sunset said, approaching her slowly. "Your sisters were killed in self-defense, as was Trenderhoof and the others. But we don't have to hold on to the past. We can all start anew. We can do better than…"

"Get away from me!" Sonata cried, drawing back. "And *you* !" She snapped her attention towards Twilight. "Why did you have to take everything I ever cared about?! I'll never forgive you for this!" She looked to the rest. "That goes for the rest of you! I hate you! I HATE YOU ALL!"

She flew out of the room and down the hall.

"Leave her," Twilight said before any pony could chase her. "It's the least we can do after all she's been through."

"Oh," Pinkie said, turning to the former mistresses. "I just realized. We kind of vanquished all your friends. Sorry."

"Eh, don't worry about it," Lemon Zest said, waving her hoof.

"It's not like we were one big happy family," Sugarcoat snorted.

"Though spraying us with all that garlic and fire wasn't very fun," Indigo Zap said, massaging the burns on her legs.

"Come," Radiant Hope said, stepping forth. "I know a few healing spells. I can help you."

"Yes," Discord said, rubbing his dragon foot. "It seems all of us suffered some injuries."

"I can put you all in some guest rooms," Twilight volunteered, "if none of you mind staying awhile."

Sugarcoat shrugged. "As long as none of you stake us."

"Don't count on it," Rainbow said warningly.

As they filed down the hall, Discord looked at Sunset.

"So what exactly made you change your mind?"

She glanced nervously at Twilight. "Let's just say…I finally saw the light."

"Oh!" Lemon Zest said, facing Discord. "I almost forgot! Sunny Flare and Sour Sweet are still in the tower. Your mare's still mourning over that rabbit."

He stiffened. "Oh no. Hope, come with me!"

She and Discord raced down the hall and up the spiral staircase. Fluttershy was crouched down, crying over the tiny body in her hooves.

"How is he?" Discord said, cautiously approaching.

She sniffed. "His…his bones are broken and…he's lost a lot of…" Her mouth watered. "Blood."

He turned to his old friend. "Hope! Can you heal this rabbit?"

The unicorn frowned as she stared down at Angel. "I'm sorry but…

my healing spells are for ponies, not animals. There's nothing I can do."

"No!" Fluttershy wailed, burying her face in his fur. "I can't lose him! Not now!" She gasped as an idea occurred to her. "Discord! What if I change him?!"

Discord hesitated. "Fluttershy, a vampire bite might have a different effect on rabbits."

"I have to try! I can save…"

"No, Flutters."

Fluttershy searched for the strange new voice. "Who said that?"

"I did."

Looking down, she saw Angel smiling up at her. She gasped.

"Angel? You…you can talk?"

"No," he said weakly. "I guess…because you're a vampire now it's one of your…special powers."

Fluttershy looked up at her husband. "Discord! I…I can understand him!"

His eyes widened. "Really?"

"Yes! He's talking to me!"

"What's he saying?"

"Flutters," Angel coughed. "Don't…don't try to save me."

"What?" Fluttershy said. "Why?"

"I'm a rabbit. It's not like I was expecting to outlive you." He sputtered. "B-But…I had a good run. At least…I'll die knowing… you're happy."

"Angel," she choked. "Please. Stay with me!"

He grinned as he lifted his paw and touched her hoof. "It's okay, Flutters. I've taken care of you long enough. That's…Discord's job… now." He winced. "It…it hurts."

"I can help you! Just tell me what I have to do to make you stop hurting!"

He looked at her solemnly. "You know…what you have…to do."

Her eyes widened as she understood. "Angel, I can't…"

Coughing, he said, "You need… blood."

She shook her head. "No. No, I won't. Maybe Discord or someone else can…"

"No. You're my best friend, Flutters. I know…you'll make it…quick."

"Angel, I…"

"Hey," he said, giving her a soft smile. "You have to…at some point. At least…you'll know…I wanted this."

Fluttershy stared at him, unsure of what to do.

"What did he say?" Discord asked.

"He," she stammered, "he wants me to…end his misery."

He looked at her in worry. "I can do it if you…"

"No. It…it has to be me."

"It'll be alright, Flutters," Angel squeaked. "I'll die…a hero."

Closing his eyes, he tilted his head, exposing his neck. Fluttershy could see there was no changing his mind. She didn't want to do this, but there was no other way to help him, and it would only be more painful if she delayed.

Kissing his forehead, she whispered. "I love you, Angel."

"I love," he coughed, "you too…Flutters."

She closed her eyes, leaned forward and brought his neck to her mouth. Her fangs sank slowly into his skin. He squeaked slightly, but did not move. The warm blood spilled into her mouth, and at the same rate it spilled from her eyes.

Beneath her hooves, she could feel his heartbeat slow until it stopped completely. Pulling away, she gazed at his clouded, lifeless eyes and the satisfied smile on his tiny face.

Sobbing, she brought him to chest. Discord put his arms around her and stroked her hair. It truly pained him to see her like this. He hadn't wanted her to deal with this so soon after her transformation, especially with a rabbit she had loved so much.

"We…we can bury him out back," he whispered.

She sniffed. "Just…let me hold him a little longer."

He nodded and continued to hold her as she cried.

Everyone agreed that after the long night it was best to turn in early. Trenderhoof's former mistresses didn't mind staying for their recovery and were each given their own guest rooms. Radiant Hope took it upon herself to tend to every pony's injuries, though Applejack insisted on taking care of Spike.

She was sitting on the edge of his bed, carefully wrapping fresh gauze around his wound.

"Funny how every time we're together, you end up bandaging my arm."

She did not laugh. "Did ya have to go and cut yourself?"

"I had to get his attention somehow," said Spike. He looked at her solemnly. "I knew he had sired you, but you didn't tell me he…I saw the scars on your chest."

She paused before finishing the bandage. "Ya didn't need to know the details."

"But to think he actually…I mean he…did he do that to Rarity too?"

She cut the gauze roll with her teeth. "She hadn't been conscious."

"And you were awake that whole time." He shook his head. "Boy, I'm *really* glad I killed him now."

Applejack sighed as she secured the bandage. "It was still a stupid thing to do."

"He was gonna hurt you again. I couldn't just sit around and let that happen."

"But I thought…" She paused as she looked up at him. "I thought I was gonna lose ya."

Spike locked gaze with her. "I thought I was going to lose *you* . That I wouldn't get a chance to find out if you really…"

Feeling his claw on her hoof, she glanced down.

"Is it true, Applejack? Am I…your soulmate?"

Closing her eyes, she nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"For one thing," she said, lifting her head. "You were in love with Rarity."

"Rarity's great and all, but…she's not the one for me." He set his other claw over her hoof. "But you've known that all along, haven't you?"

She sighed. "The day we met, when ya saved me and told me it was the noble thing to do, that's when I first knew. I…I didn't know what to make of it. I mean we had just met and ya wouldn't have understood then."

"What about later when all that mating stuff was explained to me?" Spike asked. "I mean, it's not like I'm a child. Why didn't you tell me then?"

"As time went on, I…I grew fond of ya. Not just because of Fate or anything. You're noble, brave, good-hearted, and…"

He cocked a coy eyebrow. "Handsome?"

She chuckled. "Cute, at most." Frowning, she continued, "The more I got to know ya, the more I fell for ya, the less I wanted to tell ya. If by some miracle ya ever felt for me too, and we became something more, the day would come when you'd ask me to change ya, and… well, you're a dragon and I don't know what that would do to ya. Even if ya weren't that different from a vampire pony, I couldn't…"

She looked up at him sincerely. "I didn't wanna be the one to turn ya into a monster."

Spike shook his head. "All this time, I had no idea."

"How *did* ya find out?"

"Well…Scootaloo helped a little. See, when you told me to stay put earlier tonight, I…I got a strange feeling and Scootaloo suggested that you…well, you know. Then I started thinking. About how you're always taking care of me, how when Sunset Shimmer grabbed me you rushed to my rescue, even used your bat form in the sunlight!"

"I'm surprised Trenderhoof's hypnosis didn't work on ya."

"I think I've figured it out. Haven't you wondered how why Trenderhoof hypnotized Starlight instead of Fluttershy? Maybe he couldn't. I think it's because Fate wouldn't let it happen. I mean there are all these things preventing vampires from accidentally killing their soulmates. Maybe Fate also makes sure other vampires don't kill them either, so Fluttershy and I are immune to such powers."

Applejack nodded. "That actually makes sense."

"See? I'm smart too!" He sighed. "I have to know though. Those stories you were always telling me, about the dragon knight rescuing the beautiful princess? You weren't talking about Rarity, were you?"

She bit her lip. "Guilty."

He nodded. "Well, I think it's time I saved *you* for once, don't you think?"

Applejack stared at him a while and then pulled her hoof away. "Spike, I don't want ya to feel like you're obliged to…"

"Don't!" he said, putting his claw to her mouth. "Don't go telling me that you're trying to protect me, or that you want what's best for me. I know why you kept this secret, but you still should've told me. You have no right to say that this relationship will go nowhere, or that I wouldn't like being a vampire if it comes to that. A decision like this should be made by the both of us, not just you."

Her eyes widened as she gently lowered his claw. "Ya mean ya…?"

He smiled sweetly. "You mean something to me, Applejack. I can't exactly say it's love yet, but when I saw you lying helpless beneath that…that *bastard* ! I realized that if something happened to you… gosh, I don't know *what* I'd do!

"I don't know where this will lead, or if we'll be happy in the end," he took her hoof again, "but I'm willing to give it a shot if you are."

Her jaw dropped as she stared at him. Before she knew it, he was leaning in. She stopped his lips with her hoof.

"Not yet," she said. "If…if we're really gonna do this and…you're sure, I…I want us to wait a while before we try anything like that. After all," she smirked, "you're still only fifteen."

He sighed. "Fair enough. Can you at least," he patted the spot next to him, "stay with me tonight?"

Grinning, she crawled onto the bed and snuggled beside him. He immediately flung his tiny arms around her, surprising her. Relaxing, she moved her hooves to return his hug.

For the first time in decades, happiness filled Applejack's unbeating heart. The dragon of her dreams was in her hooves at last. She had been wrong to keep him in the dark, to decide whether or not they should follow Fate. She was afraid of what would happen in the future, but his warm embrace assured her that whatever lay in store

for them, they would face it together.

Rarity was in her room, laughing with Sweetie Belle in her coffin as they made up for lost time.

"His head was stuck *where* ?!" Rarity bawled.

"In the porthole!" said Sweetie Belle. "We were exploring the ships in the Baltimare harbor, Button got curious and looked inside one, but he got stuck and it took ages to pull him out! We almost got caught by the coastguard!"

Her sister laughed harder. "That mate of yours definitely is a strange one!"

"Maybe, but he's still a sweetheart."

Rarity sighed happily. "Oh, Sweetie Belle. I just can't believe all this time you've been living a life of your own. Just look at you! Last time I saw you, you were but a filly and now you're a young lady!"

Sweetie Belle scoffed. "You look exactly the same."

"I just wish we hadn't spent all that time away from each other."

"Well, we won't have to spend any more time apart ever again."

The older mare cocked her head. "What do you mean by that?"

Her sister smiled as she took her hoof. "Come back to Zebrica with us!"

She blinked. "What?"

"There's plenty of room in the cave! Sombra and Hope would love to have you! We can stay up late during the day, gossip, do each other's manes, you know, like we used to! And you can get to know Button more and we can all hunt together, it'll be great!"

Rarity said nothing, only stared at her sister. Sweetie Belle frowned

in concern.

"What's wrong?"

Sighing, the older mare pulled her hoof away. "I'm thrilled to see you again, Sweetie Belle, and it would be wonderful to live with you, but…" She glanced around her room. "This is my home. It has been for the last century. You may be my family, but so are Discord and the girls. Beside," she grinned slightly, "you're not the only one with a special some pony in your life."

Sweetie Belle gasped. "Who is he? Tell me, please!"

"Well," Rarity giggled in embarrassment, "his name's Lord Fancy Pants…"

"A *lord* ! Wow, sis! You always did dream about being royalty or nobility!"

"Don't get too excited. We only met recently, but…"

"He's you're soulmate though, isn't he?" the younger mare said, scooching closer. "Ultimate destiny aside, he's gotta fall in love with you at *some* point! I mean you're the most beautiful mare in the world!"

Rarity looked away to hide her smile. "Nevertheless, darling, he doesn't even know I'm a…" She frowned. "Well…"

"Oh," Sweetie Belle said quietly.

"So you see why I have to stay? I need to get to know him better, until there comes a time when we trust each other enough that I can tell him. I…I just can't go with you, Sweetie Belle. Not now, anyway."

She turned round as her sister lay a sympathetic hoof on her shoulder.

"Hey," Sweetie Belle said, smiling. "I understand. You have your life and I have mine. Though," she looked at her hopefully, "you'll still come visit me once in a while, right?"

Rarity pulled her into a hug. "Of *course* , I will! But you have to promise to visit me too!"

"Duh! Besides," she said, drawing back, "we vampires have an eternity."

A small service was held out back for Angel Bunny. Few of the vampires wanted to attend because the rabbit's blood was relatively fresh and they didn't want to be tempted. So it was just Fluttershy, Discord and Scootaloo, all dressed in black for mourning. The filly hadn't known Angel for long, but he had been a good soldier. Fluttershy was so upset that Discord felt it was best not to bring up the adoption question with Scootaloo until she had recovered.

Fluttershy couldn't watch as Discord lowered the tiny coffin into the ground and she buried her face in his cape as she sobbed. Once the hole was covered, she laid a carnation and some carrots over it. Discord then conjured a small but elegant tombstone engraved with Angel's name.

Scootaloo was weary, so Discord took her inside to put her to bed, but Fluttershy wanted to stay awhile. She kneeled at the grave, running her hoof over the five beautifully carved letters.

A few minutes later, Discord returned and crouched beside her, laying his paw on her back. Now that they were both vampires, they were equals, and permission for such harmless touches was no longer necessary.

"He was happy, you know," he said softly. "In the end. He wanted it to be this way."

Sniffing, she wiped at her nose. "I know. I just…I just wish I didn't have to…"

Discord hung his head. "I didn't…I didn't want you to experience that sort of thing until you were ready. I'm sorry this had to happen to you so soon."

"He was seven," she said wistfully. "That's longer than most rabbits

live. Auntie gave him to me for my thirteenth birthday. It was one of the few times she actually paid attention to my interests. Since then, Angel had been my only friend since I met you."

"And he was a good rabbit. I didn't like him very much, but I could tell he cared about you almost as much as I do." He smirked slightly. "He was right to dislike me. He was just looking out for you." He gazed down at her as he pulled her closer. "And if you think about it, if it hadn't been for that rabbit, we might not have met."

That made Fluttershy smile a bit. "And he died a hero, like he wanted." Her momentary happiness faded. "But to think I actually…I mean I actually…"

"Shhh, shhh," Discord whispered, stroking her head. "There was no helping him. If you had let him alone, it would've been longer and more painful, and he knew you needed the blood. It was best you have his blood knowing he wanted to die than to…do it by accident.

"And hey," he lifted her chin so she could look into his eyes, "now that you know you can communicate with animals, you can determine which ones are willing to die, and you can make it peaceful for them. We vampires exist to keep the balance between predators and prey in the world. Now you know there are animals that accept that. Don't you see? You can survive as a vampire and still help the creatures you care about."

He brushed some strands of hair out of her face. "It doesn't matter where you are on the food chain. You'll always be the kind-hearted angel I fell in love with."

Fluttershy was speechless, awed by his words. Closing her eyes, she puckered her lips. Discord sealed the gap between them. Her mouth opened for him and their tongues entwined. Passionately, he dug his claws into her mane and deepened the kiss by bringing her closer. Then his eyes opened when he felt her fiddling with his shirt buttons.

"What are you doing?" he asked, pulling away.

"Well," she said, biting her lip. "I thought since…we're married now

we should…"

"Here? Now?"

"Oh no! We can just…go up to our room and…"

"No, no, Fluttershy," Discord said, placing his paw and claw on her shoulders. "We can't. Not tonight."

She blinked. "W-Why not? Didn't you…want this?"

"I do. Believe me I *really* do, but…not like this. You're grieving. If we were to do this while you're emotionally vulnerable, it would be taking advantage."

"But what if I want it too?"

He shook his head. "I don't want our first time to be because you are sad. I want it to be because you are happy, because you love me, not because you need cheering up." He caressed her cheek. "You just lost your bunny. You need time."

Fluttershy gazed up at him for a long while and then scoffed.

"What's so funny?"

"It's just," she said, shaking her head, "when I woke up, I was afraid I'd become a monster, that I'd…made a mistake. But now," she smiled up at him, "you've reminded me why I chose this in the first place, why I made these sacrifices."

Blinking, he asked, "Because you love me?"

"That and…you're the only one who respects me, who comforts me at times like this, who would never take advantage of me even when I want you to." She raised her hoof to his face. "If I had stayed with my aunt, Angel still would've passed away at some point, but then I wouldn't have had someone like you to help me through it."

His eyes gleaming with hope, he clutched her hoof in his claw. "So, you don't regret marrying me?"

She glanced down sadly at the grave. "I regret what I had to do to Angel," she looked back up, "but I'll never regret what I did to be with you."

As his wings fluttered joyfully, they kissed again, this time a gentle peck.

"Let's go to bed," he murmured. "To sleep."

In one swift movement, he scooped her up into his arms, producing a laugh from her as he carried her into the castle.

Gasping as if she had been underwater, Sunset sat up in bed. She glanced around frantically and found herself in an unfamiliar room. Then she remembered she was a guest at Count Discord's. Clutching her head, she tried to stop it from spinning.

She hadn't known what to make of her last encounter with Twilight, but this recent vision had given her something to think about, but she couldn't ponder in this strange room. Getting out of bed, she went to explore the castle for someplace more tranquil.

After trying several doors and annoying a few sleepy vampires, she found two cedar wood doors on the ground floor which opened into a library. Marveling at its size and grandeur, she slowly turned round. She had never seen so many books, not even at her library at home. It was enormous, yet also in disarray, for there were mountainous piles of books and papers everywhere.

A shriek brought Sunset back to reality and she also shrieked when she spotted Twilight at a table with an open book in front of her.

"Oh!" Sunset said, looking to the side. "Sorry, I didn't know any pony was in here."

"No!" Twilight said a little too loudly. She cleared her throat. "I mean…this isn't a public library but…it's not exactly private either."

"Right." She rubbed the back of her neck. "Well, I just wanted to find a quiet place to think but if you're busy here…"

"Oh you don't have to leave!" Patting the chair next to her, she said, "Grab a book and make yourself comfortable."

Gulping, Sunset sat down and glanced at the open book. "So, um… what's that you're reading?"

"Oh," Twilight said, biting her lip. "It's just some light reading. You probably have never heard of it."

The thickness of the book suggested it was over a thousand pages. Looking at the page it was open to, Sunset recognized some of the text.

"Is that… *War and Peace* by Leo Tolsteed?"

Twilight looked up at her in surprise. "You know Tolsteed?"

She turned her head away. "I, um…may have glanced at that book once…twice…"

"This is my *fourth* time reading it!"

Sunset gawked at her. "It's…it's one of my favorites!"

Excited, Twilight levitated another book from one of the piles. "I have a first-edition copy in its original Moscowvian language!"

"You speak Moscowvian?"

" *Ne ochen' khorosho, no ya mogu chitat* ," she giggled.

Sunset's jaw dropped as she gently ran her hoof over the Moscowvian words. "Where did you get this?"

"My father gave it to me for my twelfth birthday. He wanted to translate it for me, but I wanted to figure it out for myself."

"At *twelve* ?! I was learning Prench but *Moscowvian* ?! That's a completely different alphabet!"

" *Parlez-vous français?* "

" *Oui, très bien!* "

They both laughed. Then Sunset's smile dropped.

"Every pony in my village said a mare shouldn't know much more than to read, write and, in the case of a unicorn, pick up items with magic. Starswirl was the only pony who believed I had the potential to do more."

Twilight frowned. "Why did you kill him then?"

She wrapped her hooves around herself. "Trenderhoof promised me power. He talked about taking over the world one day, showing those naysayers what I can do, making them suffer for belittling me." She hung her head. "I guess it blinded me from seeing that Trenderhoof was no better than the rest.

"He told me…I shouldn't show off my intelligence to others, that ladies weren't expected to be smarter than stallions, to save it for 'The Day.'" Gritting her teeth together, she said, "But he never really intended to help me with my plans, did he?"

Twilight looked down at her book. "Well, he *did* give you power."

"Magically, yes." She sighed. "You know what's ridiculous? I *knew* he was a pig. As if it wasn't obvious what he was doing with the Dazzlings while giving them their 'special assignments.' And I knew what he did with his victims before killing them. I suspected, anyway."

Hoping the younger mare couldn't see the stray tear, she wiped it away. "I guess…I just didn't want to believe that I had been duped, that I had thrown away everything for…for nothing."

Feeling sympathy, Twilight cautiously placed a hoof on Sunset's back, making her look up.

"Do you miss him?"

"I'm glad he's gone, and yet…" She grunted. "I *hated* him, but I loved him at the same time. You must think me pathetic."

"No! No, Sunset! You mustn't hate yourself for what *he* did to you!"

"But I *let* him have all the power! I should've been smarter!"

"That doesn't make you pathetic! Remember, you weren't the only one he hurt. You're not alone in this."

She turned away. "I thought I was stronger than every other mare, but I'm just as weak."

"No!" Twilight said, grabbing her face so she could look at her. "You *are* strong! When you knew the truth, you stood up to Trenderhoof! Now that he's gone, you have the freedom to move on, and fall in love for r—"

She paused as they locked gaze. Sunset gently lowered Twilight's hooves and they both turned away in embarrassment.

"So, um," Sunset said, biting her lip. "How does it feel knowing Adagio and Aria are gone?"

Twilight lowered her gaze. "Cold. I've…I've never killed anyone before."

The yellow mare cocked her head. "Never?"

"I've only been a vampire for a month and a half."

"Oh."

"Even though I'd been looking to kill the Sirens ever since they killed Flash, I…I don't feel any satisfaction from their deaths."

"Well, Sonata's still out there. You gonna go look for her?"

She shook her head. "She knows what I suffered. That is enough."

"Is that why you're in here? You couldn't sleep because you feel guilty?"

"No. I couldn't sleep because…" Pausing, Twilight glanced briefly at the mare beside her. "Never mind."

There was a long period of silence. Twilight pretended to return to

her reading while Sunset's eyes wandered to the tall shelves. The only sound was the tapping of Sunset's hoof on the table and the occasional turning of a page.

"Twilight?"

"Yes?" Twilight said abruptly, her head shooting up.

Twiddling her hooves, Sunset stammered, "Y-You s-said when a vampire meets her…m-mate…"

The lavender mare leaned closer. "Yes?"

Sunset was becoming more nervous by the second. "T-They s-start…dreaming?"

Swallowing the lump in her throat, she replied, "Y-Yes."

"W-Well, that's…why I'm down here."

Twilight's eyes widened. "You had a dream?"

She nodded.

"What about?"

Looking away, she said, "I'd…rather not say."

"Oh."

After a brief silence, Sunset asked, "W-What were… *your* dreams about?"

"I'd rather not say," Twilight replied quickly.

"So…neither of us would rather say."

"Looks like it."

Quiet reconvened as the two mares avoided eye contact.

"Look," Sunset said, rubbing the back of her neck. "I think we should talk about…what happened earlier."

"I think so too," Twilight said, facing her.

The yellow unicorn looked at her hesitantly. "Are you certain that… whatever is going on between us is…Fate giving us a sign?"

"Well," Twilight said, glancing down at her hooves, "it's also…animal instinct."

"But is *this* ," she pointed back and forth between them, "even *natural* ?"

"I didn't think so at first, but then I did some research and," she levitated several books off a pile and flipped through them, "while these sort of feelings are strongly…discouraged, it's not as uncommon as you might think."

A book of poetry was shoved in Sunset's face. "Some of the earliest evidence of desire between ponies of the same sex dates back to Ancient Grace with the poet Sapphony whose erotic poems were addressed to other mares."

"Wait a minute," Sunset said, holding up a hoof. "Sapphony was a *mare* ?" She paused as her eyes widened. "Suddenly her poems make a lot more sense."

"Since Sapphony hailed from the island of Lesbolt, the term 'lesbian' was used to refer to any mare who was attracted to other mares, or one who did not adhere to her gender role. There are also characters in Shakespony's plays and Darles Chickens' novels who exhibit homoerotic tendencies…"

"Okay, okay." Sunset lowered the books hovering near her. "So it's not entirely uncommon. But still, if vampire soulmates are determined by Fate as you theorize, why would Fate put two mares together? I mean…how would we even…?"

Without meaning to, she glanced down at the space between Twilight's legs. Noticing, the lavender mare smoothed out her skirt and set her hoof on her lap.

"Well," she said, clearing her throat. "First we need to look at why vampires mate in the first place. If you want to look at an

evolutionary point of view, vampires drink blood to balance the mortal population, but if they indulge too much, there will be no mortals left to drink. If they were to fall in love, they'd be compelled to change mortals rather than devour them, but if they were to fall in love more than once, there would be too many vampires."

"Fair point," Sunset admitted. "It's not like we could reproduce either way."

A smile tugged at Twilight's lips. "So you see? What we're feeling is completely natural."

"Even if all this is right and Fate, Celestia or some higher power is planning everything for us, how can we be sure we're even… compatible?"

"Well," Twilight looked at the open books as she lowered them, "we like to read and…we're both interested in magic…"

Sunset smirked. "To think, a few hours ago we were at each other's throats, and now we're talking about our romantic compatibility."

"I never really wanted to kill you," the lavender mare murmured.

"Neither did I," Sunset said sincerely. "I just wanted to duel with you. I've never *seen* magic like yours! The way you anticipated my every move and even imitated some…it was all brilliant! And to think you're younger than me by at least ten years!"

Chuckling, Twilight replied, "I just studied you carefully. You had put a lot of effort into those spells."

"But they took me years to master! It only took a few minutes for you to…"

She paused and then turned away again.

"Sounds like we're pretty," Twilight mumbled, "compatible."

Sunset sighed. "Yeah, well, there's more to a relationship than just… having stuff in common."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there are," she looked down at her lap, " *physical* … attributes."

It was a good thing vampires couldn't blush, because both their cheeks would've been redder than their eyes in bat form. Regardless, their bodies were growing warmer, even if still below normal temperature.

"Y-Yes," Twilight stuttered. "I s-suppose that sort of thing is… important."

Turning her head slowly to her, Sunset asked, "H-Have you ever…?"

"No," she replied hastily. "Y-You?"

The yellow mare hesitated. "Not with a mare."

Twilight nodded. "Flash was a gentlecolt."

"Ah. Trenderhoof wasn't."

"I see."

Once again, silence ensued as the mares slowly moved to face each other again. Their eyes locked, but they averted each other's instantly.

"You know," Twilight said, magically closing her books. "According to the scientific method, if one has a question they cannot answer through simple research, the best way to answer it is through… experimentation."

Sunset gawked at her. "A-Are you saying we should…?"

"Not all the way!" she said, holding up her hoof insistently. "Just… you know, little by little. If we…enjoy it then…we'll know."

Their eyes locked together again and this time, they did not look away.

"S-So," Sunset stammered, leaning in. "W-We should just…"

"Try," Twilight said, also moving forward.

"And see if…"

"…we're…"

They did not finish the sentence, for their lips had brushed together. It was barely for a second when they pulled away, staring at each other in wonderment.

"Um," Twilight murmured. "Analysis?"

Sunset ran her tongue over her lips. "That was…interesting." She paused. "W-What is…y-your analysis?"

The lavender unicorn bit her own lip to see if the taste was still fresh. It was.

"Have you had chipmunk recently?"

She shrugged. "I had to get a quick refreshment before the battle."

Twilight nodded. "I can…taste the nuts."

They were quiet.

"So," Twilight said with a gulp. "Was that enough to…?"

"I think," Sunset said, shifting in her seat, "w-we should make sure."

The other mare also shifted uncomfortably. "H-How?"

"Perhaps…another trial is in order?"

"Uh-huh!" She winced at how eager she sounded. "I mean…if you think it necessary."

"Right," the yellow mare said, brushing a strand of red hair behind her ear. "So, um…"

"Let's try it."

"Yes."

They kissed again, this time closing their eyes and letting it last longer. In those three seconds, Twilight saw a splash of color beneath her eyelids and the taste of nuts reminded her of the chestnuts she and Spike would roast on the Hearth's Warming fire. Inhaling sharply, she could smell that fire, along with fresh parchment and ink. At first she thought those last two smells were from the books, but they were really pheromones.

When they pulled away this time, they were heaving.

"Well?" Twilight gasped.

"Better," Sunset said, licking her lips curiously. "But…maybe we should try one more trial, but this time, we should add more… variables."

The lavender mare blinked. "S-Such as…?"

"Well," she glanced to the side anxiously, "kissing doesn't always just include the," her tongue flicked, "lips."

Twilight gulped. "Oh."

Sunset remade eye contact. "If you're not up to it right now, we don't have to…"

"No! I mean…if we want this experiment to be a success, we shouldn't be afraid to…explore."

They leaned in again, much more hesitantly. Their eyes did not close until their lips touched. Twilight stiffened as she felt Sunset's tongue on her lips. She wasn't sure what to do. Her kisses with Flash had never been this intense. Then, realizing Sunset's mouth was open, she opened hers too.

It was like holding hooves, only moister. As their tongues hooked together, Sunset tentatively raised her hoof and found Twilight's neck, tugging her closer. Twilight's eyes sprang open as the kiss deepened and she saw Sunset's other hoof moving to her back leg. She squeaked inwardly at the sudden pressure on her thigh.

Closing her eyes, Twilight tried to relax into the kiss, even lifted her hoof so she could caress her partner's foreleg. It was obvious Sunset was experienced, for she knew which areas would get the most response out of her. Twilight was scared, but also curious to see where this was going. The feel of Sunset's lips on hers ignited a fire inside, insisting that this wasn't wrong, that she was right to trust what Fate had decreed.

Clasping one hoof onto her back and clutching her dark blue mane with the other, Sunset pulled her in closer. Twilight had to scooch her chair in to prevent herself from falling off. Seeing her dilemma, Sunset kicked her own chair out from beneath her as she stood and turned Twilight so that she was pressed to the back of her seat. Without removing her lips, Sunset moved on top of her, swinging her back legs to either side.

Twilight gasped as she pulled away, but Sunset quickly brought her mouth back. Her body moved like a snake as her hooves explored Twilight's chest and moved down to her thighs. Something was thumping wildly between them, and Twilight could feel the same thing happening to the other mare.

When her hoof wandered to the edge of her skirt, the lavender mare pulled away in alarm. Sunset looked just as shocked, as if she hadn't planned for it to go this far. Yet neither of them complained or attempted to move out of their position. Their back legs were intertwined and were throbbing in perfect synchronization.

"N-Now?" Twilight squeaked.

Sunset glanced down and cautiously ran her hoof across her partner's chest. "Do you…?"

Her breath staggered as she felt the yellow hoof go to her throat. Those brilliant green eyes rose to meet hers and the throbbing between them accelerated.

"Yes."

Heaving an exasperated sigh, Sunset placed her hooves on either side of Twilight's head. "Damn it all."

The chair fell over as her lips came crashing down on hers.

I am SO sorry if you wanted Angel to live! But the more I went over the possibility of him becoming a vampire bunny, the more I realized that Angel had to die in order for Fluttershy to come to terms with her new vampire self. Besides, this isn't as mega-happy a fic as my others. But I couldn't find it in my heart to kill Sonata.

Would you believe I wasn't originally going to have Applejack and Spike get together in this fic? I was just going to have subtle hints, but turns out you long-time fans wanted it to happen! I'm glad it did.

I think this is the first time I've really delved into a lesbian relationship in writing. Sheesh, it's hard to specify which "she" you're talking about.

" *Ne ochen' khorosho, no ya mogu chitat* " is the phonetic spelling of " Не очень хорошо , но я могу читать," which is a rough Russian translation of "not very good, but I can read." (my only source is google translate, correct me if I'm wrong, but then again I said Twilight's not fluent)

HORSE PUNS TIME!

Leo Tolsteed = Leo Tolstoy

Grace = Greece (I tried to combine the word with "grade" which is a horse that has only a small amount of recognizable breeding)

Sapphony = Sappho (the original lesbian poet)

Lesbolt = Lesbos (the island she lived on)

Shakespony = Shakespeare

Darles Chickens = Charles Dickens (thank "Matilda" for this

one)

Parting Ways

It was barely dawn when a knock came at the castle door. Rainbow, Rarity and Pinkie were the first ones out of bed as they groggily came to the top of the steps.

"Who could that be at this hour?" Rainbow said with a yawn.

"I don't know," Pinkie Pie groaned, "but if it's another vampire coven coming to kill us, tell 'em we'll see 'em tomorrow."

"This is the police!" a bellow came from outside. "Open up!"

The three of them stiffened.

"They must be here about Fluttershy!" said Rainbow.

"What do we do?" Pinkie squeaked, her legs shaking. "I can't go to the big house! I'm not gonna get locked up again!"

"Calm down," Rarity said. "Pinkie, go wake the Master and…"

"Uh, Rarity?" Rainbow whispered. "Aren't you forgetting last night was their wedding night? They might not be…decent."

The unicorn bit her lip awkwardly. "Right. Pinkie, knock first."

"Got it!" Pinkie chimed before zipping off.

The knocking grew louder.

"Coming!" Rarity called, lifting her skirts as she rushed down the stairs, Rainbow flying behind her.

When they opened the door, they were met with two constables. They were a tall pair of stallions with white fur and dark blue uniforms. One was a unicorn, the other a pegasus. Rarity smiled sweetly up at them.

"May we help you, officers?"

"Where is she?!" Starlight demanded as she pushed through the police stallions.

"Where is who, doamnă?"

"My niece!" The lady shoved Rarity aside as she stomped into the entryway. "I know you have her here!"

"Come in, why don't ya?" Rainbow huffed as she waited for the officers to enter before closing the door.

"Forgive the intrusion, domnişoare," said the unicorn officer as they followed Starlight down the hall, "but two nights ago the Lady Starlight's niece, the Lady Fluttershy, disappeared from her bedroom and hasn't been heard from since."

"The Lady Starlight here believes that she might be here," said the pegasus officer.

Rarity and Rainbow glanced at each other nervously.

"W-What makes you think she's here?" the latter asked.

"Because even though I was to have her marry Count Trenderhoof yesterday," Starlight said gruffly as they came into the foyer, "she insisted that she was going to marry Count Discord! Where else would she be but here?!"

"No accusations are being made," the pegasus officer explained. "We are just making an inquiry. May we speak with your master?"

The two mares hesitated.

"Um," Rarity stammered, "the Master has not yet awoken and…"

"Then awake him this instant and demand that he produce my niece!" Starlight barked.

"Okay, okay!" Rainbow exclaimed. "Hold your horses!"

The unicorn officer scrutinized her. "Are you a mare in male attire?"

She glanced down at herself and then at the police. "Um…I'll just go get the Master!"

As she flew upstairs, Rarity smiled innocently at the stallions. "She, um, doesn't *usually* dress like that. That's just her, um…sleep ensemble! Yes!"

"Yes, right," the pegasus officer grumbled. "You wouldn't happen to know the whereabouts of Count Trenderhoof, would you?"

Rarity blinked. "Count…Trenderhoof?"

"It appears he is missing too. Neither he, nor his sister, nor his four servants for that matter have been heard from since yesterday."

"He was searching for my niece," Starlight said, scowling accusingly at Rarity. "Perhaps *you've* snatched him up too! After all, you tried to seduce Lord Fancy Pants! Who's to say you haven't done the same with Count Trenderhoof?!"

The white unicorn mare gawked. "I beg your pardon, but Count Trenderhoof wasn't even at that party! And no, I haven't seen him."

"Lady Starlight claims his coach is out front," said the pegasus officer.

She stiffened. "Is it now? Well, perhaps he came by, but I didn't answer the door so I wouldn't know, and perhaps he decided to search the forest and…"

"What's all this then?"

Rarity sighed in relief as her master came down the stairs in pony form.

"There you are!" Starlight bellowed, coming up to him. "What have you done with my niece, you fiend?!"

"Rest assured, doamnă," Discord said, holding up a hoof. "The Lady Fluttershy is indeed here, but she came here on her own accord."

"Balderdash! You've kidnapped her! I demand you return her at…"

"He's telling the truth, Auntie."

Every pony looked up as Fluttershy appeared on the landing. She was still wearing her black gown from Angel's funeral, now with a matching hat. Thanks to the veil hanging down from the brim, her red eyes could not be seen. Starlight gawked as her niece gracefully descended the staircase, her back straight and her head held high. She could hardly recognize her.

"Fluttershy?" Starlight said. "Why…why are you dressed like that?"

"I am in mourning, Auntie," Fluttershy replied softly. "Angel Bunny passed away last night."

She blinked. "Oh. How unfortunate." Clearing her throat, she said firmly, "Well, dear, I must say your little excursion is over." She grabbed her hoof. "Let us go home now."

"I *am* home, Auntie," Fluttershy said, pulling her hoof back.

Starlight's jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

"Count Discord is my husband. This is my home now."

" *What* ?!"

The police turned to Discord.

"Is this true?" asked the pegasus one.

He nodded. "We eloped two nights ago."

Starlight gasped. "You…you scoundrel! You have defiled my niece! You will pay for this!"

"This was *my* doing, Auntie," Fluttershy said.

She turned to her in alarm. " *You* ?!"

"I told you. I had no intention of marrying Count Trenderhoof. I love Count Discord. He cares for me, he respects me. And you need not worry about my provisions, because he is much wealthier than

Count Trenderhoof."

"But *you* disobeyed *me* ?! You would make a disgrace of our family?!"

"Auntie," Fluttershy said, looking her in the eye. "I am not a filly anymore. I am a married mare. You have no authority over me. That right belongs to my husband." She beamed at Discord. "That is not to say he rules over me."

"She is right, doamnă," the unicorn officer said. "If the Lady Fluttershy is married, she is now in the charge of her husband."

"I…" Starlight stammered. "I want proof! I want proof that this marriage did indeed take place!"

The policed looked to the count. " *Do* you have proof?"

Fluttershy and Discord exchanged a nervous glance. While a blood marriage was sacred for vampires, it wasn't legal in the eyes of mortals.

"Actually," Discord said, reaching into his coat pocket, "I have the certificate right here."

He produced an official looking document which he levitated over to the police. As they scrutinized it, they nodded and mumbled agreements.

"Looks legitimate," the unicorn officer said, turning to Fluttershy. "And you say this union happened with your consent, domnişoară?"

"Yes," she replied.

"Then," he said, returning the document to Discord, "there is nothing more we can do here."

"But officers!" Starlight protested.

"No crime has been committed."

"What about Count Trenderhoof?! He has yet to explain what his

carriage is doing outside!"

The pegasus officer sighed. "You wouldn't mind if we searched your castle, would you?"

The three vampires glanced at each other anxiously.

What do we do? Fluttershy thought. *We can't tell them what really happened.*

But we can't just lie either. We'll look suspicious.

She turned to her husband in surprise. *Discord? You can understand my thoughts?*

Oh, yes, didn't I tell you? Vampire mates can communicate with each other telepathically. One of the perks of us being one entity.

This is amazing!

Yes, it is, but we still have a problem to deal with. I'm afraid I'm going to have to use my hypnotic powers, otherwise they're never going to leave.

She took a moment to think about it. *Yes, I suppose you're right.*

Discord's horn illuminated as he made eye contact with the police and Starlight.

"Now, listen to me," he said as his eyes swirled. "When you awaken from this trance, you will think you have searched the entire castle but have found nothing of interest to you. You will assume Count Trenderhoof abandoned his carriage out front and got lost in the woods. Then you will leave this place without further question of his whereabouts. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master," the three of them said in unison.

"Good. When I tap my hoof three times, you will come out of this trance." He tapped his hoof with each number. "One…two…three."

The ponies blinked.

"Well, there's nothing here," the unicorn stallion said casually.

"So sorry to disturb you, Count Discord," said the pegasus officer with a bow. "And congratulations on your new marriage."

"It's no trouble at all," Discord said, holding up a hoof. "You stallions are merely doing your job."

"We will just get out of your mane then. *Bună dimineaţa, domnule* ."

With another bow, the officers exited the foyer. Starlight stayed behind as she stared at her niece.

"So," she said, clearing her throat. "You are… *content* with this match?"

"I am," Fluttershy said, taking Discord's hoof. "And I have no regrets."

Starlight sighed in defeat. "Congratulations, Fluttershy. You did the one thing I could never do."

"Marry for love?"

She shook her head. "You thought for yourself."

Hesitantly, she held out her hoof, but Fluttershy didn't take it. Instead, she wrapped her aunt in a tight embrace. Starlight was caught off-guard, as they had never done this before. It felt… pleasant. And so, slowly, she returned the hug.

"I suppose," Starlight said, drawing back, "since you don't need me anymore, there's nothing left for me here."

Fluttershy watched her aunt sadly as she walked away. "What will do then, Auntie?"

The unicorn paused and then looked back with a shrug. "I hear Moscow's lovely this time of year."

"Twilight!" Rainbow called as she pounded on her friend's door. "Are you awake?"

A muffled voice replied, "Yes?"

"You need to get up! The Master wants us all in the dining room, including our guests! It's important!"

"Okay! I'll be right there!"

"By the way, have you seen Sunset Shimmer?"

"Sunset?" Twilight's voice became a squeak. "I haven't seen Sunset!" A nervous laugh was heard. "What makes you think I've seen Sunset?!"

Rainbow scrunched her muzzle. "Uh, I'm just asking because she wasn't in the room we gave her. You don't think she's bailed on us, do you?"

"Uh…I wouldn't worry about it, Rainbow. She's probably just, um… stretching her legs somewhere. Have you checked the, um…the library?"

Rainbow blinked. "No."

"Maybe she's there!"

"Hmm. Okay, I'll check the library. But let me know if you see her, okay?"

"Okay!"

Inside, the lid to Twilight's coffin was open a crack. She listened to the flap of her friend's wings and waited until it was silent.

"You should probably get to the library."

Throwing the lid open with her magic, Sunset sat up and groaned. "If you're gonna sleep in coffins," she said, stretching her hooves, "could you at least make them less cramped?"

"Sorry, I don't usually have a," Twilight grunted as she attempted to untangle her back legs from Sunset's, "bedmate."

As she sat up too, Twilight glanced at the mare beside her and then down at her own naked body. Feeling self-conscious, she spread the sheets over her chest in an effort to conceal herself. Then she realized how silly it was considering their bare thighs were already pressed together in this tight space. Both mares were looking to the side, afraid of what might happen if they made eye contact.

"So," Twilight said.

"So," Sunset said, twiddling her hooves.

They paused.

"Analysis?"

The older mare glanced briefly at her. "You say that was your first time?"

"Mmm-hmm," she replied with a small nod.

Sunset shrugged. "Could've fooled me."

"So," Twilight said with a gulp, "does that mean I was…?"

"Good?" She smirked. "Considering I've never done it with a mare," she paused, "or in a casket," another pause, "or on the remnants of a broken chair," she rubbed her foreleg in embarrassment, "or atop a table full of books."

The lavender mare bit her lip. "So…would you say the experiment was a…success?"

"I guess." She turned to her. "What was the research question again?"

Their eyes locked. "It was whether or not we are…compatible."

"Ah." Sunset looked down at her naked body. "In that case, I'd say it was a…success."

Twilight could not hide her smile. "So…what happens now?"

Her lavender hoof slithered over to touch her yellow one. Sunset stared down at them for a while, and then pulled her own hoof away.

"We get dressed."

Frowning, Twilight watched as Sunset rose from the coffin and started picking her clothes off the floor.

"So…is that it?"

"Hmm?" Sunset mumbled as she slid on her undergarments.

"I mean," Twilight said, clearing her throat. "What just happened, that…that's not going to be the only time, is it?"

She paused and looked back at the mare wrapped in the sheets. She smiled softly at the memory of being in there with her.

"I suppose we could get one last round in before I leave."

Twilight blinked in confusion as the other mare continued dressing herself. "L-Leave?"

"For Bullarest, of course. Trenderhoof's dead. I'm his so-called next of kin. So legally, his mansion and all his possessions are mine. I suppose I will have to come up with some excuse for his sudden disappearance." She tapped her chin. "Does 'devoured by wolves' sound too far-fetched?"

"Oh." The lavender unicorn heaved a sigh of relief. "Of course you would have to go back to Bullarest and take care of your late 'brother's' finances. I completely forgot! When do you think you will be back?"

Sunset stopped her stocking midway up her leg as she looked at her in bewilderment. "Back?"

"You *are* coming back, aren't you?"

Her expression was unreadable. After a moment's silence, Sunset

heaved a sigh.

"Twilight," she said slowly, "last night was…fun, but…you can't expect this to work out, can you?"

Twilight's eyes widened. "Y-Yes. That's *exactly* what I expect."

"Sorry, but…" Sunset shook her head. "There's just no way this can."

The younger mare's heart sank. "H-How can you say that after… what we just did?"

"And suppose some pony else finds out about this? What are they going to think?"

Putting her hoof on her hip, she replied, "In fairness, your 'incestuous' relationship with Trenderhoof wasn't exactly public either."

Sunset sighed again. "That's a fair point, but even if we managed to keep it a secret, or if by some miracle the world changes its mind, that doesn't guarantee that this will work out."

Twilight blinked. "Then…why did we just…?"

"I was curious about what it would feel like."

As she turned around to slip on her dress, the mare in the coffin scowled at her.

"So…all this was just an… *experiment* to you?"

"Isn't that what you called it?" Sunset said as she brushed her mane out of her collar.

"Yes, but it wasn't just for the sake of *science* !" she exclaimed, rising with the sheet still wrapped around her. "I actually wanted to see if we were compatible like Fate decreed! Wasn't all this enough to prove it?"

As the yellow mare faced her, she looked her sincerely in the eyes.

"Just because we made love doesn't mean we're *in* love."

"You can't know that for sure!"

"I don't! I don't even know what love is!" Sunset tried to hold back her tears. "For ten years, I let a stallion I thought I was in love with take control over me! How do I know this won't be the same?"

"Because I'm not Trenderhoof! Sunset, I would *never* want to hurt you the way he did!" Twilight swallowed the lump in her throat. "But if you pass this off as some…tawdry roll in the hay, then you'll be stooping to his level!"

"What do you want me to say? That last night was the best I ever had? Because damn it, it *was* !"

Silence fell upon them as they stared at each other with wide eyes. Sunset broke it with a grunt as she shook her head.

"I just…this all happened so fast and…" She clasped Twilight's hoof in hers. "I need to think about this. You can understand that, can't you?"

When Twilight saw the confusion in her eyes, she let out a defeated sigh. "You're right. We jumped into this too quickly. But I have to know," she looked at her hopefully, "do you…care for me, at all?"

After a few seconds of staring blankly, Sunset dropped her hoof. "Ask me again later."

On that note, she turned on her hoof and departed the room, leaving Twilight alone with her sheets and her oncoming tears.

Twilight was the last one to arrive in the dining room. She ignored everyone's questions as she took the only available chair. Sunset was three seats away across the table, and judging by the fact that members of her coven surrounded her, it was obvious that she had made sure she was sitting as far away from Twilight as possible. This made the lavender unicorn glare furiously at her.

Discord sat at the head of the table with Fluttershy on his right and Rainbow on his left. Next to Fluttershy was Applejack, who was holding Spike's claw under the table, then came Twilight, Sugarcoat, Indigo Zap, Lemon Zest, Sombra and Radiant Hope. On Rainbow's right side was Scootaloo, followed by Pinkie, Rarity who sat with her sister, Sour Sweet, Sunset Shimmer, Sunny Flare, Bulk Biceps and Button Mash.

Discord addressed them all. "I'm sure you're wondering why I gathered you all here so early in the morning."

Sunny Flare yawned. "You woke me from my beauty sleep."

"Yes, well I'm sorry, but this is an emergency. We just received a visit from the police, and they were inquiring the whereabouts of Trenderhoof."

All who hadn't been aware of this stiffened.

"What did ya tell 'em?" Applejack asked.

"We told them we hadn't seen him," replied Discord, "but apparently his carriage is still parked out front. So we told them that he might have left it there and decided to search the forest on hoof."

Sugarcoat huffed. "That's a terrible excuse. Who taught you to lie?"

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Anyway, in the end, I used my hypnosis to throw off their suspicion, but I can't guarantee that they won't come back. They're not going to stop looking for Trenderhoof until they find a body, which we can't give them."

"I think I know how to handle this," said Sunset. "When Trenderhoof attempted to marry Fluttershy, he said the reason for his haste was because he had business in Zebrica. I can go to the police today and tell them that he merely gave up his search for Fluttershy and left on a boat this morning."

"But how do we explain his carriage outside?" asked Lemon Zest.

"We'll say that we were using it but got lost and decided to stay at Count Discord's for the night. In fact, we can say Trenderhoof left

because he knew about Fluttershy's marriage. We'll say that we didn't mean to cause any confusion and that we intend to return to Bullarest at once."

"So you are not staying," Fluttershy said.

"Trenderhoof's estate is legally mine, as long as every pony thinks I'm his sister. After a while, we can make up some story like Trenderhoof was eaten by some panther in the jungle or that he drowned in the river." She turned to Discord. "No pony will suspect any of you or any of us had something to do with his disappearance."

"All the same," Discord said, "I do not think it will be long before ponies start spreading rumors. We cannot keep the police away forever. They're bound to make inquiries at City Hall and discover that my marriage to Fluttershy isn't legal."

"So what are you saying?" Rainbow asked.

He heaved a heavy sigh. "I'm saying it may not be safe for us in Zebiu anymore."

"You mean…we'll have to move?" Pinkie inquired, pouting her lip. "But I like it here!"

"It won't be forever. Just for a few decades until all who have seen us are gone and we can come back pretending to be the next generation."

"We used to do this every now and then before you, Applejack and Twilight arrived, Pinkie," Rarity explained. "We once spent a few years in Prance."

"You could always come to Zebrica for a while," Sombra offered. "It's secluded enough."

"Can we go to Japony again?" Rainbow asked eagerly.

"Now, now, before we decide on anything," Discord said, taking Fluttershy's hoof, "I think my wife and I should go on our honeymoon first."

Fluttershy smiled. "And on the way, we could find a new place for us to live?"

"Wherever you like, my darling."

"What about me?" Scootaloo asked. "If you guys are leaving, what am I to do?"

Discord and Fluttershy glanced at each other and nodded.

"We have been talking," the latter said, "and we've been waiting for the right time to tell you."

"You have no parents," said Discord, "and vampires can't have children. So we were wondering…"

Fluttershy grinned brightly. "Would you like to be a part of our family?"

Scootaloo's eyes widened as she glanced between them. "You mean…you guys want to… *adopt* me?"

"We may not be the sort of parents you imagined," Discord said, "but we can ensure that you are well taken care of and…"

"Yes!" She leaped out of her chair and rushed over to hug them. "Yes, I'd love to stay with you, Mom and Dad!"

Fluttershy laughed as she and Discord embraced the filly.

"Guess this means I'm your big sister, huh?" Rainbow said with a wink.

"Me too!" Pinkie squealed. "I have sisters again!"

"Of course," Discord said, pulling away, "you understand that now that we're married, Fluttershy and I need some…alone time before we can be a family."

"Oh, I understand," said Scootaloo. "In the meantime, I can hang out with Rainbow and the others."

"Not me," Applejack said.

"What do you mean by that?" Fluttershy asked.

"I'm goin' back to the farm. My family's still out there, and they're not gonna last too long, especially my granny. Even if they'll wonder why I'm not gettin' any older, I wanna be there for 'em as long as I can."

"And I'm coming with you!" Spike declared.

"Spike?" Twilight said.

He turned to her. "You may be the closest thing I have to a sister, Twilight, but you didn't expect me to stick around all the time, did you? We always knew I was going to grow up at some point. And now that I've found Applejack," he lifted up his beloved's hoof for all to see, "I want to be there for her."

Twilight smiled as she hugged him. "I'm going to miss you, Spike, but I'm also happy for you." She frowned as she glanced at Sunset. "Not all of us can have what you have."

"While all of you might be thinking of leaving," Rarity said, "I for one intend to stay. Fancy Pants is here, and if there's a chance that we're going to be together, I have to be here when that happens. Meanwhile, I can keep house while you are all away."

"I think I'll stay awhile too," Sweetie Belle said. "I mean if Fluttershy and Discord are going to be using our cave for the next few weeks or so, they're going to want their privacy."

"Good thinking, Sweetie Belle," Radiant Hope giggled.

"So," Pinkie sniffed, "does that mean we all have to…say goodbye?"

"It won't be forever, Pinkie," Rarity reminded her. "We'll just be… parting ways for a short while."

"Yeah," Applejack said. "We'll all see each other again, once we get our lives in order."

"And we won't be all alone," Rainbow said, patting Pinkie's back. "Once Fluttershy and Discord get back from their honeymoon and find us a place to live, it'll be you, me, them, Scootaloo and Twilight."

Twilight bit her lip as she glanced between Sunset and her friends. The yellow unicorn was avoiding eye contact, but every now and then Twilight would see her look briefly in her direction. Whether Sunset wanted her around or not, she couldn't stop thinking about what they had shared. She had never been happier, she had never felt more wonderful. She had already lost Flash. She was not going to lose another love.

Standing up decidedly, Twilight said, "If Sunset's going to Bullarest," she made her way around the table, "then I'm going too!"

"What?" Sunset said.

Every pony made similar surprised exclamations as they turned to Twilight, who was taking the yellow unicorn's hoof.

"You can push me away all you want," she said in determination, "but I'm not going anywhere. You might not be ready, and I will wait for centuries if that's what it takes, but what we have can't be ignored. I'm just as scared and confused as you are, but nothing has ever felt so real and so right to me, and I know you feel the same. So please," she got down on her knees, "don't let this chance we have slip away."

As Sunset stared at her in awe, every pony watched with their mouths agape.

"Uh…did I miss something?" Rainbow inquired.

When Applejack saw how intensely the two mares were looking at each other, she stood up, knocking her seat over. "Naw!"

Rarity put her hoof to her mouth. "Oh my!"

Fluttershy turned to her husband. "Discord, are they…?"

"Incredible," Discord murmured.

"What?" Spike asked. "What's so incredible?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Pinkie snorted.

"What's so obvious?" Rainbow asked.

Sunset looked at the others and then at Twilight, who nodded. The former let out a sigh.

"You're even more stubborn than I am. Every pony," she said, standing up while still holding the lavender mare's hoof. "We, um… have something to tell you."

"It seems," Twilight said, "that while I still loved Flash, he…wasn't as meant for me as I thought."

"That's why you didn't have dreams after you were bitten, right?" Pinkie questioned.

"That's right. Well…that changed a few days ago when…" She grinned slightly. "Well, Sunset and I…"

"We're soulmates," Sunset said, putting her hoof around Twilight to bring her closer.

There was a collective gasp of shock.

"A mare and a mare?" Sunny Flare said, pointing between the two of them.

Sour Sweet fainted out of her chair.

"You guys aren't mad, are you?" Twilight asked her friends.

Rarity bit her lip. "We're *surprised* , but…"

"Who are we to object with Fate?" Discord said, pulling his wife to his side.

"But why didn't ya tell us?" Applejack demanded.

"We didn't know then," Twilight explained.

"But you two have met more than once," said Rarity. "How come you didn't realize this earlier?"

"We've been wondering that too. I think part of it might've been that I was still hung up on Flash and Sunset was bound to Trenderhoof, so naturally it took a while for it to sink in. I thought the dreams I was having were a curse cast by Sunset, but last night when we were dueling, I realized it had been Fate giving me a sign."

"So you fell in love while fighting?" Pinkie squealed. "How romantic!"

"Man," Rainbow heaved, clutching her head. "Our coven has the weirdest couples."

"And…all of you?" Sunset said, turning to her compatriots.

"Eh," Sugarcoat said with a shrug. "We've done worse."

"Though it'll take some getting used to," said Lemon Zest, cringing slightly.

"Hey, at least she's better than your last mate," Bulk Biceps said with a wink.

"If none of you approve," Sunset said, "you don't have to stay with us in Bullarest. After all, you're all free to do what you want. I know I was cruel to you in the past, but I will do what I can to help you all get back on your hooves."

The five former mistresses exchanged glances.

"It's not like we have anything better to do," said Sugarcoat bluntly.

"And who knows?" said Indigo Zap. "Maybe in the future, you two will be able to make yourselves public."

"The world *is* changing every day," Pinkie giggled.

"And we have an eternity," Twilight said. "Plenty of time for us to get to know each other better."

Sunset smiled. "Yes." She squeezed her partner's hoof. "We do."

Hours later, after the sun had set, the vampires gathered outside the castle. Earlier, Bulk and Sunset had told the police their story and gone to Starlight's to pick up their things. Whatever had been Trenderhoof's was sitting in a large pile. Rarity, Applejack, Sunset and the other former mistresses surrounded it.

One by one, they took items from the pile and destroyed them in any way they could. Rarity especially enjoyed ripping up his clothing with her magic. Sunset vaporized his shoes with a single zap. Applejack had the honor of smashing his spectacles with her hoof.

When they were done, they put the remnants back into a pile and backed away. The unicorns lit up their horns and incinerated the horrid reminders of the stallion who had wrong them and watched as they slowly burned into nothing.

"It's over now," Spike said, taking Applejack's hoof.

She smiled down at him. "Thank ya."

The others also said their thanks and shook the dragon's claw. Once the bonfire had done its work, Discord extinguished it with a waterfall.

Then it came time for the vampires to part ways.

"Goodbye, Twilight," Spike said, embracing his childhood friend. "Say hello to Shining Armor for me."

"You will all come visit me in Bullarest, won't you?" Twilight asked as her other friends hugged her.

"Of course, Sugar Cube," said Applejack.

"We can't stay away from you!" Rainbow exclaimed.

"And don't forget to write!" said Rarity.

"Or we'll think you've abandoned us!" Pinkie whined.

"You're all welcome at our mansion whenever you like," Sunset said, turning to the draconequus. "I can't thank you enough for the gold you lent us."

"Well, now that you're with Twilight, you're practically family now," Discord said. "The gold should be enough to pay off Trenderhoof's debts, but you girls need to think of some other way to get money."

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll think of something." She looked to her partner. "Ready to go, Twilight?"

"One moment. I have two more goodbyes to make." She embraced Fluttershy. "Good luck with your marriage."

"And good luck with yours," Fluttershy said. "You know, when it happens."

Twilight pulled away and looked up at the draconequus. "I don't know what I would've done if I hadn't met you."

Discord sighed sadly. "You'd still be mortal."

"But if you hadn't made me a vampire, I wouldn't have defeated the Dazzlings, and I wouldn't have found what I was missing. I…I wouldn't be happy now."

She wrapped her hooves around his middle and he grinned as he patted her back. As she drew away, she whispered to Fluttershy.

"Keep him out of trouble, okay?"

She giggled. "I will."

Sunset took Twilight's hoof and led her to the carriage to which Bulk was hitched.

"I don't think we'll all fit in there," Sunny Flare said.

"Why don't you all fly ahead?" Sunset suggested. "Twilight and I will," she sent her partner a coy glance, "take the carriage."

Twilight chuckled. "As long as the others don't mind."

"Oh, of course not!" Sour Sweet chimed before grunting. " *Just keep the curtains drawn.* "

"Yeah, we don't need to see you two going at it," Sugarcoat agreed.

Wings sprouted from five mares' backs, except for Indigo Zap and Lemon Zest who were pegasi, as they launched into the sky. Twilight was clenching her jaw in embarrassment. Sunset, however, didn't look the least bit fazed by their comments as she opened the coach door.

"Ladies first," she said with a bow.

Twilight laughed as she entered the carriage and her partner followed. As Bulk carried the coach down the road, a lavender hoof waved out the window and the others waved back, shouting their last goodbyes.

"Hey, look at that," Pinkie piped, squinting in the distance. "They really *are* drawing the curtains."

"Are you two taking a carriage too?" Scootaloo asked her new parents.

"No," Discord said with a toothy grin. "Fluttershy and I have something more… *special* planned. Besides, you girls are going to need the black carriage."

Fluttershy knelt down to hug her adopted daughter. "You be good to Rainbow, Rarity and Pinkie now, okay?"

"You won't be gone long, will you?" Scootaloo begged. "I mean I just got you guys."

"We'll be back before the end of the month," Discord said, scooping them both up into his arms. "We promise."

Discord and Fluttershy then moved on to embrace their friends.

"We'll keep an eye on her," Rainbow assured them.

"You can count on us!" Pinkie said with a salute.

"And we'll make sure they don't destroy your castle," Hope said with a chuckle.

"Thanks for bringing my sister back to me," Sweetie Belle said, shaking Discord's paw.

Discord paused when he came to Applejack. "I know you didn't want this, and I'm sorry I couldn't help you, but…"

She cut him off with a hug. "Thank ya, Discord. Thank ya for savin' my life all those years ago."

Smiling, he laid his paw and claw over her back. "It was no problem." He glanced at Spike. "I'm glad you found happiness at last."

When Applejack pulled away, Fluttershy hugged her too. "I don't think I would've changed my mind if you hadn't talked to me."

"It was no problem, Sugar Cube," she said with a grin. "I was wrong to get in the way of you and Discord. It doesn't matter what yerr problems, as long as you're with the one ya love."

"When are we going to the farm, anyway?" Spike inquired.

"We'll leave in the mornin'. They'll all be up for the chores, and it's not far from here."

"It is a shame you two won't be here when we come back," Fluttershy said, pulling away from Applejack.

"If y'all begin to miss us, Discord knows where the farm is. When y'all find a new place, let us know where."

"Ooh!" Pinkie piped. "Maybe we can have a big reunion party!"

Discord laughed. "If you wish, Pinkie." He turned to his wife. "Are you ready, darling?"

Fluttershy nodded. "Yes, but…how are we getting there?"

"First," he spread out his wings, "you're going to need a flying

lesson."

She paled. "What?!"

"You mean she doesn't know how to fly?!" Rainbow exclaimed.

"I…never learned."

"It shouldn't be hard," Rarity said assuredly. "Once you're turned, flying comes naturally."

"And you were flying beautifully when you awoke," Discord said.

"But," Fluttershy stammered. "I don't even remember how I…"

"That's okay," Rainbow said. "We'll teach you."

"The first thing you have to do," Discord said, kneeling down behind her, "is go into bat mode."

"H-How do I do that?" Fluttershy inquired.

"You gotta dig real deep!" Pinkie said. "And let out your inner animal!"

"Sometimes what you're feelin' can trigger it," said Applejack. "Like anger or hunger."

"Or," Discord said, laying his paw and claw on his wife's shoulders, "whatever makes you feel…wild and carefree. Like," he whispered in her ear, "what we do when we're alone?"

Understanding, Fluttershy looked down to hide her shy smile. As she thought of what their honeymoon would be like, her wings started changing.

"That's it, you're doing it!" Rainbow said. "Keep thinking whatever it is you're thinking!"

Fluttershy closed her eyes and before she knew it, she was a bat pony again.

"Yay!" Pinkie applauded. "Flutterbat is back!"

"Now," Discord said, backing away. "Flap your wings."

Gulping, Fluttershy spread out her wings and gave them a gentle flap. She screamed as the force from them raised her a meter off the ground.

"Keep flapping!" Rainbow said. "If you stop, you'll fall!"

Fluttershy squealed as she rose higher and higher. "It…it won't stop!"

"It's alright!" Discord said, flying up to her. "I'm here with you."

"Why do I keep getting higher?"

"Vampire wings are strong," Rainbow shouted. "Don't worry, you're doing great!"

Fluttershy looked down at herself. "I…I am." She laughed as she looped in the air. "I'm doing it! I'm flying!"

The ponies and dragon below clapped.

"I'm flying!"

"Shall we go then, my darling?" Discord asked, throwing his arms around her and pressing her to his chest.

Fluttershy smiled up at him. "Yes, I'm ready."

They waved at their friends as they flew off into the night.

"Goodbye, every pony!" Discord shouted.

"Be careful!" Rarity called.

"Watch out for the sunlight!" said Hope.

"We'll never forget you!" Pinkie wailed.

Their farewells faded away as the newlyweds soared over the forest.

"I can't believe it," Fluttershy marveled as they passed over Zebiu.

"It's so… *beautiful* up here!"

"What I tell you?" Discord said, swooping underneath into her view. "There's nothing to be frightened of."

"So where are we headed?"

"To the docks!"

"So we *are* going by boat?"

"Only the best for my eternal bride." He reached up to caress her face. "Have I mentioned you look absolutely *stunning* as a bat?"

Fluttershy giggled as she turned her head away. "You're just saying that."

"No, I'm serious." He flew up to her eyelevel as he flapped backwards. "You've never looked more beautiful. Well, except for maybe when you were in that wedding gown."

As they flew towards the shore, Fluttershy looked back and watched the town she had grown up in become smaller and smaller. Discord noticed her wistful gaze.

"Are you going to miss it?"

"A little," she admitted, looking ahead. "Then again, it was about time I left."

"And you're going to love it, my sweet," he said, putting his arm around her. "The world is an amazing place."

She grinned as she folded her wings so he could hold her. "I'm sure it is," she nuzzled her face into his chest, "as long as I'm with you."

Don't go away! There's still an epilogue!

Epilogue

The apple trees were taller than Applejack remembered. Those that had been seedlings now towered over her. She gaped in awe at their grandness as Spike walked beside her. He held out his claw to stop her and pointed ahead. A yellow, red-headed earth mare in a simple brown dress and kerchief was bucking a tree. She wiped her brow as the apples fell into a circle of wooden buckets.

"That's her," Applejack murmured. "That's Apple Bloom."

It had been ten years since she had last seen her sister. Then, she had been a maid of seventeen, fresh out of the schoolroom. Now, she was a grown mare, and in the morning sun she was beautiful.

"I can't do this."

Applejack tried to turn around, but Spike grabbed her hoof.

"You said so yourself," he said, looking at her sincerely in the eye. "They're not immortal like you. If you don't see them now, you might never see them again."

Applejack sighed and let him lead her through the orchard. When Apple Bloom spotted them, she let out a gasp.

"APPLEJACK!"

She ran towards her sister and tackled her to the ground. The two of them laughed as they tumbled in their embrace.

"I can't believe it!" Apple Bloom exclaimed as she rose to her hooves. "You're really here!" She helped her sister up. "I didn't think you'd ever be comin' back!"

"Me neither, Apple Bloom," Applejack said as she examined her. "Look at ya. You've gotten so big!"

"And you…" Apple Bloom cocked her head as she scrutinized her

sister. "Ya look exactly the same. Shouldn't ya be forty-somethin' by now? How come ya look so young?"

Applejack sent Spike an uncertain glance, and he urged her with his claws. She sighed in defeat.

"Apple Bloom," she said, looking her in the eye, "I'm a vampire."

The younger mare blinked and then threw her head back in laughter. "Oh, that's a good one! Still got yerr sense of humor, I see!"

The couple turned to each other and shrugged, deciding to laugh along with her.

"And who is this cute little fella?" Apple Bloom said, crouching down to the dragon.

"This is Spike. My, uh…"

She paused to think of the appropriate word. Spike thought of it for her.

"I'm her gentledrake friend!"

Apple Bloom's amber eyes widened as she glanced between them. "Really, AJ? I mean I'm okay with him bein' a dragon, but ain't he a little…young?"

"Hey, I'm just short for my age!" Spike said, puffing out his chest.

She scoffed. "If ya say so." She grabbed her sister's hoof. "The others are gonna wanna see ya! They're in the house gettin' breakfast ready!"

She dragged them down the hill to the small wooden cottage sitting between a large red barn and a chicken coop. Two foals were playing on the porch, the older one a red colt with amber eyes and pink hair, the younger a magenta filly with green eyes and yellow hair. They shrieked in surprise when they saw the newcomers.

"Auntie Apple Bloom!" said the filly with a shiver. "What's that dragon doin' here?"

"It's okay, Honeycrisp," Apple Bloom said. "Spike's a friend. Or, at least, he's a friend of yerr aunt."

"But *you're* our aunt," said the colt.

"Honeycrisp, Jonathon," she gestured to her sister, "this here's yerr long-lost Aunt Applejack. Applejack, these are Big Mac's kids."

"I know," Applejack said, smiling at the foals. "You told me about 'em in yerr letters."

"We have *another* aunt?" Jonathon asked.

"This is," Honeycrisp piped, "wonderful!"

The children laughed as they threw their hooves around Applejack's front legs. The door opened and a magenta earth mare with green eyes and a light pink mane. In the crook of her foreleg was a yellow infant with equally green eyes and a braided orange mane. The mare grinned brightly at the visitors.

"Applejack!" she cried as she came up to the vampire, giving her a brief hug with her free foreleg. "It's so wonderful to see you again!"

"It's wonderful to see ya too, Cheerilee." She looked at the baby. "Is this lil' Apple Blossom?"

"It sure is."

Applejack held her hoof out to the baby, who gurgled as she grabbed and lightly sucked on it.

"Where have you been all this time?" Cheerilee inquired.

"Oh, you know," Applejack said with a shrug. "I've been busy workin' with the Count Discord, but since he's leavin' Tramplevania, he said I could come back and live with y'all."

"You mean," Apple Bloom squealed excitedly, "you're staying?!"

She nodded in reply and her sister attacked her with another hug.

"And I'm Spike!" the dragon declared. "Applejack and I are sort of… together, you know?"

"Pleasure to meet you, Spike," Cheerilee said, shaking his claw. "Big Mac is plowing the fields. He'll be back in time for breakfast. Oh, he's going to be so thrilled!" Her face turned serious. "Granny Smith is in bed. She'll want to see you."

She led them all inside and Applejack swallowed the lump in her throat as she went up the stairs to her grandmother's room. The elderly green mare was lying in her bed, looking as thin as a twig. Her dry mouth was open as she snored lightly. Applejack cautiously approached her.

"Granny?"

The old mare wearily lifted the wrinkled lids to her amber eyes. "W-Who's there?"

"It's me, Granny," Applejack said, kneeling down at her bedside. "It's Applejack."

"Applejack?" she said weakly.

She couldn't stop the joyful bloody tears from coming. "That's right. Applejack."

As she squinted at the vampire, the corners of Granny Smith's mouth slowly turned up. "Applejack. I…I didn't think I'd get to see ya again before…before…"

"It's alright, Granny," Applejack choked through her tears as she took her grandmother's hoof. "I'm home. And I'm never leavin' ya again."

In the late Count Trenderhoof's illustrious mansion in Bullarest, Sunset Shimmer was sitting down to tea with Twilight and her brother Shining Armor, a tall white stallion with blue eyes and hair dressed in his uniform as Captain of the Royal Guard. Only one of them was drinking tea, of course.

"It's is an honor to meet you at last, Captain," Sunset said as she poured her guest tea.

"Shining Armor, please," the stallion said as he used his magic to drop sugar lumps into the cup. "I was surprised by your invitation, my lady, but when you informed me that my sister was working for you…" He turned to Twilight. "What exactly is your job here, again?"

She exchanged a nervous glance with Sunset. "I'm her…um…"

"She's my secretary!"

"Yes, secretary! You know," she laughed awkwardly, "because I'm all about books and paperwork and…other secretary…stuff."

"Well," Shining Armor said, not noticing the mares' odd behavior, "I must say I'm glad you've moved on from all this vampire nonsense."

"Actually, Shining, the reason I've…pursued other interests is because I found our parents' murderers."

He spat out his tea. "You *did* ?!"

She nodded excitedly. "I caught them in Zebiu."

"And?"

"Justice has been served."

He sighed in relief. "Thank the heavens!"

"But only two of the murderesses were captured," Sunset said. "One escaped the police and could be seeking vengeance on Twilight, or even you."

"Well, you don't have to worry about me. I'm a trained soldier, remember? But Twilight, did you really track down those killers by yourself?"

"Well," Twilight said, glancing at her so-called employer. "I had a little help."

Hanging his head, he said, "I'm sorry if I hadn't been supportive in your search, Twilight. I really did want to find our parents' murderers. I just didn't want you to get in over your head. And after what happened to Flash, I was worried I might lose you too."

"It's okay, Shining," she said, taking his hoof. "We don't have to worry about anything anymore."

"We actually wanted to talk some business with you, Captain," said Sunset.

"Business?" Shining Armor's eyebrows shot up. "What sort of business?"

The lady placed her folded hooves firmly on the table. "I'm sure you've heard of my brother's…disappearance."

"Yes." He nodded grimly. "Very tragic. The Coltgo jungle is just as dangerous as the city."

"Well he left a great deal of debt behind. While I received a generous grant from some distant relatives, I am going to have to find my own way to pay for my expenses. I hired Twilight, because I think she can help me in my new business."

"And what new business is that?"

The mares grinned at each other.

"We're opening a private detective agency!" Twilight announced.

"A detective agency?" Shining Armor repeated. "Well, can't say I'm surprised at you, Twilight, but my lady," he looked to Sunset Shimmer, "I did not take you to be interested in this line of work."

"Frankly, I'm quite bored with society," said Sunset. "I want to dedicate my time to more important matters. After all, I lost some pony close to me too and…I'd like that case to be solved."

"We were hoping the Royal Guard could use our services," Twilight explained. "Not that I think you incompetent, brother, but I'm sure you're aware of how many unsolved cases there are in Bullarest."

Shining Armor smiled. "It's no problem. In fact, there's a case regarding the murder of one of my guards that is baffling us as well as the police. Considering what happened to Mother and Father and Flash, you might be interested."

After he explained the case, the captain decided to take his leave and return to his duties, leaving the two mares alone to discuss the case.

"His throat was completely ripped out while on patrol," said Twilight. "You sure none of the girls had anything to do with this?"

Sunset shook her head. "We only attack law enforcement when necessary, but it usually draws too much attention, and as far as I know, Trenderhoof gave no order for such a thing."

"It happened on the night of a full moon. It could've been a werewolf."

"Not every murderer has to be supernatural. It could've been a mortal." She grinned mischievously. "If it is, may I eat them?"

"Sunset," Twilight warned, "we talked about this."

"But what if they're criminals?"

"All the same, you agreed you wouldn't feed on ponies anymore."

"Even the bad ones?"

"If the murderer turns out to be mortal, they will go to jail like any other criminal."

"Oh, you're going to starve me, Lavender," Sunset pouted as she slid her hoof over Twilight's. "After all, there aren't that many animals in the city."

"The answer is still no."

"Not even a teeny nibble?"

Her yellow hoof was going up her foreleg.

"That's not going to work, Sunset."

"What if they have open wounds?" Her hooves snaked around her neck. "Can't I just suck on them a little?"

Twilight shook her head. "You're impossible."

"Yes? Well, so are you."

They chuckled as they leaned in for a kiss. Neither of them saw Sugarcoat standing in a doorway nearby.

"If you two are going to be doing that, can you at least do it in your room?"

Fluttershy's eyes closed blissfully as she inhaled the scent of the sea. Her new senses were incredible. Not only could she smell the salty waters, but everything beneath them: the fish, the dolphins, the turtles, the seaweed, the coral. They were all satisfying as they tickled her nostrils.

The ship she was on had been constructed by Discord himself. He thought it would be less trouble having a nosy crew about, so he had set this boat to sail itself directly to their intended destination. On the boat's side written in cursive golden letters was its name: *The Fluttering Bat* .

Opening her eyes, Fluttershy watched the sunset on the horizon. Then she looked down at the waters, smelling the tasty morsels below the surface.

"If there are any fish down there," she called softly, "who are willing to satisfy our hunger, please come up. I promise that you won't suffer."

She waited and a minute later, a large mackerel tuna leaped up and into her hooves. Fluttershy could tell from his glazed eyes that he was old, and even though he was nearly a meter in length, she didn't find him so heavy.

"Go ahead," the fish wheezed. "I've lived a long life. I've almost gone blind."

Fluttershy sympathetically stroked his head. "I'll make it quick."

She ducked below the ledge so that she was out of direct sunlight, carrying the fish with her. Slowly, her teeth grew into fangs and she bit down hard into the tuna's neck. A crack of the spine was heard and the fish fell limp. Fluttershy sighed as she wiped the blood from her mouth.

I caught us some tuna for dinner , she thought to her husband.

Sweet! Discord replied in her head. *Let me know when the sun has set.*

She rose to look back out at the sky. *It's beautiful, Discord. I wish you could see it with me.*

Me too, darling. But I'll take your word for it.

She pondered awhile. *Maybe there's a way.*

Discord emerged from below deck a few minutes later, his cape wrapped tightly around his body, his paw and claw gloved and his head and neck covered in what looked like an executioner's hood. Over his eyes was a wooden pair of goggles with tiny slits for the eyes. Fluttershy couldn't help but giggle.

"I know, alright?" he snorted. "I look ridiculous, but at least I'm not burning up." His covered head looked in all directions. "So where's this beautiful sunset?"

"This way."

She grabbed the side of his cape, led him to the ledge and pointed out at the horizon. She could hear Discord gasping in awe.

"It's…it's…" He cried out as he covered his eye slits. "It burns!"

"Are you alright?" Fluttershy shrieked.

"Yes," he said, lifting his gloved paw slightly. "Maybe if I just…shield them a bit, I can…" As his paw hovered over his eyes, he quietly watched the sun as it sank below the horizon. "There we go."

Fluttershy smiled as she took his claw. Once the orange orb was gone, Discord yanked off his goggles, hood and gloves and stretched out in relief.

"Sweet darkness, that was uncomfortable!" He grinned down at his wife. "But it was worth it."

Then he noticed the tuna. "I see your fishing skills are improving."

"Yes," Fluttershy said, cringing slightly. "But could you, um…"

"Say no more."

She turned away as he brought out two goblets, hung up the fish in his paw and gutted it with his claw so its blood would spill into the cups. Once the corpse was emptied, he tossed it into the sea.

"For you, my darling," he said suavely as he handed her a goblet.

"Why thank you," Fluttershy said with a small curtsy.

They clinked their cups together and drank.

"Mmm," Discord said, smacking his lips. "Salty."

"But tasty," Fluttershy said with a sigh. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that."

"Oh, but you're getting so good at it. Did this one willingly come to you?"

"Yes. He was old and going blind."

"Then you made things easier for him. Besides, we're not the only fish eaters out here."

"That's true. A blind fish can't survive long out in the ocean."

"It's a dangerous world down there," Discord said, looking down into

the waters.

"I wonder what it's like," said Fluttershy, following his gaze.

He glanced over at her and saw the curiosity in her eyes. He smirked mischievously.

"You know," he said, leaning his elbow on the ledge, "we could go see." He crept his claw towards her. "Do you know how to swim?"

Fluttershy looked down at his claw as it touched her hoof. "A little. When I was on my parents' farm, I used to swim in a nearby pond, but…it's been so long."

"Don't worry." He set down his goblet and scooped her up in his arms, making her gasp. "It's less likely you'll drown if you don't need to breathe," he caressed her cheek with his claw, "and with me staying so close to you."

Fluttershy glanced down at the water and then at him. "What are you suggesting?"

He whispered in her ear and her eyes widened.

"But Discord, what about the boat?"

He snapped his fingers and there was a loud rattle followed by a thump as the ship's anchor dropped from the side.

"It's not going anywhere," he said, wriggling his eyebrows.

Fluttershy shook her head with a laugh. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Oh, I can think of a *few* things."

She welcomed his lips and clung to him as he leaped off the boat, plunging them both into the water.

At long last, my longest fanfic ever is complete! And it only

took...11 months? Wow, doesn't feel that long. At least I got it done in time for the new school year.

I'm just going to clear the air right now. No, I'm not making a sequel. I think it's best to leave this story off where it is. Sorry if you wanted Pinkie and Rainbow to get mates, but I didn't see room for that in this story. Personally, I prefer CheesePie and SoarinDash, but really I'll leave that to your imaginations. And no, I'm not adapting this into an audio drama. I've got enough of that right now.

What I WILL be doing is trying to finish "CMC: The Next Generation." "Princess and the Unicorn"...I just don't know. I've neglected that fic so long I might have to just shelve it. But this year is my senior paper, and for Creative Writing majors that means a lot of...well, writing. So most of this school year will be focusing on that. At least I can check this project off my list.